



# Formal history education in Lebanon: Crossroads of past conflicts and prospects for peace



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## ABSTRACT

By promoting inclusive identities among young generations and equipping them with critical attitudes and skills to untangle political claims, formal history education bears the potential to play a constructive role in processes of conflict transformation. Yet, as this ethnographic study of Lebanon shows, history education may as well act as weapon of war, sustaining hostilities and obstructing youth in pursuing a better future. Bringing together perspectives from students and teachers, curriculum designers and academics, as well as media and politicians, this paper highlights the intricate challenges and potential of peace-building through history education in societies affected by protracted conflict.

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## 1. Introduction

I tell my students that they should learn from the past in order to build a better future. But how can they learn when I cannot teach them their own history?" Rana, who works as a history teacher in a village school in South Lebanon, looks troubled as she describes the predicament she faces in her classes. "My students ask me, 'Miss, why does Lebanon have so many wars?' 'Who fought in our civil war?' Yet the only thing I can reply is that they should bother their parents with such questions, or that they are still too young to understand. I don't know what else to say because here in Lebanon, talking history means talking politics. And talking politics will only ignite new wars. . .

Following this exchange with Rana, I stroll across the playground with a group of grade eight students and enquire how they appreciate their history lessons. Nibbling on freshly baked *mana'eesh*, they exclaim with one voice, "we don't like history! It's only about dreary old men, way too boring." One of the girls sighs, "today I memorise this chapter for the test, but by tomorrow I will forget all of it. History is just useless." I ask if ever a history lesson had appealed to her. She stares at me in disbelief; the mere idea is resolutely rejected. "It's only about old kings and wars. Seriously, I don't get why we should study all of

that. It won't help us in any way! Why do you think we all hate history?"

## 2. Methodology

A focus on history education was not originally part of my doctoral research, which has sought to highlight the linkages between formal elementary education and protracted violent conflict based on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in five Lebanese elementary schools. Drawing on relevant literature, my initial research outline focused on the impact of armed conflict on local school communities in general and on the lives of children in particular, and on the ways in which identity and violence are represented in school curricula, textbooks, and interactions in and around school environments. The inductive nature of ethnographic research, however, allowed for additional subjects to come forward during the process of data collection, thus encouraging me to incorporate what my interlocutors defined as critical in understanding the education–conflict nexus. Among other elements, my attention was drawn to the crucial role that history education plays in reflecting and shaping the course of conflict. Underrated by academics and practitioners alike, history education is generally considered less relevant and empowering than subjects like maths, sciences and languages. Hence, history tends to be pushed to the margins of scholarly enquiry and peacebuilding efforts. Undeservedly so, my respondents demonstrated.

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Structured and unstructured exchanges<sup>1</sup> with approximately 350 students aged seven to 15, 30 teachers, seven principals, and a number of local policy makers, academics, and activists made me aware of history education as one of the key sites where political conflict and the prospects for peace come together. Preliminary data analysis then compelled me to incorporate an outlook on memory and forgetting of past conflict, and the role of formal education in these processes, in a slightly amended research design. My interlocutors convinced me that addressing the past in a meaningful way is a complicated yet critical part of enabling young generations to overcome legacies of prolonged conflict, break with sectarian logic and cycles of violence, and pursue a brighter future. The now following will shed light on some of the intricacies and opportunities involved in such endeavour.

### 3. Silencing a painful past

I accompany Rana's students as they sit for their history exam. Sitting among them on one of the wooden benches in the back of the classroom, I leaf through their history textbook, curious to explore what students actually learn about Lebanon's past, and particularly to discover how history education shapes students' views of past and present conflicts affecting their country. To my surprise, the textbook's narrative comes to a standstill in 1943, the year French Mandate rule was cast off and the Republic of Lebanon gained independence. Lebanon's history ends with freedom, religious coexistence, and prosperity that were to befall the nation in the decades following independence. These bright promises, however, contrast sharply with the gloomy post-independence memories held by many Lebanese, including today's children, who have already witnessed their share of armed conflict and protracted instability.

The most notable gap in the textbook concerns Lebanon's civil war. Between 1975 and 1990, approximately 150,000 people were killed and multitudes injured, while roughly a quarter of the population of four million was displaced. Renowned for the scale and brutality of its atrocities, Lebanon's civil war affected virtually every family across the country, often inflicting both personal and material loss. Civil war legacies continue to haunt the present as up to 17,000 persons remain missing, bullet-scarred structures are ubiquitous, mine fields are yet to be cleared, and countless people are continue to put up with its mental and physical scars (see [Khalaf, 2002](#)). Many of today's politicians are former warlords who retained their positions of power as a result of a general amnesty that pardoned their war-time crimes. As such, Lebanon's civil war does not only dominate its past and present; it also casts its shadow forward towards the future.

In the face of all of this, however, Lebanon's official history textbook seeks comfort in silence. It discusses neither the decades of sectarian strife, nor Lebanon's precarious position in the lingering 'Middle East conflict,' nor the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees inhabiting shanty towns across the country. It would be hard to claim that these histories are irrelevant to understanding present-day Lebanon; let alone that avoiding these subjects altogether should enable today's children and youth to come up with grounded ideas to move beyond a state of protracted conflict.

While pondering these quandaries, I empathise with the sense of irrelevance and estrangement expressed by Rana's students

towards the history they are taught – especially since I know many of them are preoccupied with political conflict and were born in families marked by war-inflicted loss or displacement. Simultaneously, however, I understand Rana's reluctance to discuss conflicts of the past, as these have far from been resolved and may easily ignite volatile dynamics inside her classroom. As the school bell announces the end of the session, I am left wondering how silencing a painful past, in an institution as significant as formal education, shapes young generations' capacities to overcome prolonged conflict. How does formal history education take shape in a complex field of conflicting actors and interests? And how may it contribute to processes of peace-building in conflict-affected societies?

To address these queries, I will first provide a theoretical elaboration of history education as inherently political endeavour, especially so in conflict zones. Subsequently, the case study of Lebanon is presented, whereby the various actors and media involved in the production and consumption of history education will be examined: successively, the experiences and perspectives of students, teachers, curriculum designers, text book authors and historians, and politicians are discussed. The article rounds up by highlighting how formal history education is positioned at the crossroads of past conflict and prospects for peace, and by calling for greater efforts to bolster history education's potential to support and protect children as part of larger processes of conflict transformation.

### 4. History education's precarious role in conflict-affected societies

Children across time and place have been taught about the past of the communities they were born in. Standardised history instruction in systems of mass education, however, is rather typical of the modern age. Formal systems of education emerged as part of the 18th and 19th century rise of nation states as sovereign political actors on the world stage (see [Boli et al., 1985](#); see also [Anderson, 1991](#)). State-led education has not only served to prepare young citizens for participation in national economies, but also to direct children's loyalties towards national polities, thereby subordinating identifications with religion, ethnicity, class, and gender (cf. [Korostelina, 2008](#); [Schiffauer et al., 2004](#)). Accordingly, standardised history education came to play a key role in processes of nation building, in which it has positioned young generations as members of a collective national consciousness by stimulating their identification with a nation's past, present, and future. History education, as such, is instrumental to imprinting and sustaining a hegemonic notion of a system of nation-states as undisputed or preferred way of ordering the modern world. We should, therefore, approach the phenomenon of formal history education not as a mere informative exercise aimed at raising historical awareness, but as intricately linked to quests for representation and power.

By foregrounding the cultivation of productive and loyal citizens, rather than reflexive or critical enquirers, school-taught history differs from a history as object of academic enquiry. [VanSledright \(2008\)](#) stipulates that history textbooks tend to objectify past events, glorify particular political leaders, and downplay episodes of controversy and internal conflict (2008). As a result, students tend to meet predetermined, deterministic, or linear understandings of their nation's movement across time, which prevents them from critically evaluating resources and representations as cultural constructs rather than natural facts (cf. [Anderson, 1991](#); [Eriksen, 2002](#)). To our aim of understanding the relation between history education and conflict, it is important not only to understand formal history education as inherently political, but also as a cultural product of a particular time and place.

<sup>1</sup> Consisting of 120 full days of participant observation in classrooms, on playgrounds and in teachers' rooms; structured and unstructured interviews; projective and enabling exercises such as map-making, draw-and-tell activities, story-telling and drama; village tours and home visits; and attendance of local and national meetings, conferences and ceremonies. The research was conducted partly in Arabic and partly in English; analysis of textbooks was conducted with the help of an interpreter translator. Names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

Official, authorised history usually becomes solidified in a national history curriculum that brings together what are perceived to be a nation's key historical episodes, representatives, and achievements. History curricula, in turn, constitute the basis for the production of history textbooks. Not only the contents of national history curricula and textbooks, but also their production sheds light on power configurations in a particular time and place (cf. [Podeh, 2000](#), p. 81). Both content and production reveal who is entitled to define a nation's historical narrative through the selection of events and actors – and who is not; which approach, style and language are deemed appropriate for conveying the nation's past, and which images, maps, and symbols are incorporated to support the narrative – and which are not. Many of the choices made throughout this processes are politically informed; and all reflect the related dominant cultural practices and paradigms.

Thus far, we have established that history education plays an important role in shaping children's identifications with social collectives; that its current, near universal application is linked to the rise and hegemony of nation states in the modern era; and that the development of history curricula and the content of textbooks reflect political power at least as much as academic enquiry. History education tends to value one dominant perspective over a complex whole of possible alternative interpretations and is therefore linked to political struggles for legitimacy and representation. This helps us understand why history education in conflict-affected societies is contested to a degree that scholars refer to it as a 'battlefield' ([Baranović, 2001](#); [Davies, 2009](#); [Foster and Crawford, 2006](#)), a 'weapon' employed in identity politics ([Bush and Saltarelli, 2000](#); cf. [Cole, 2007](#); [Degu, 2005](#)) or a site of 'war' ([Korostelina, 2010](#)).

When sub-national identifications prevail over national ones, for instance among religious or ethnic minorities, the supposedly overarching, national history may be questioned, challenged, or rejected. This is especially true when communal relations within a state have been marked by oppression, exploitation or violent competition. In such cases, interpretations of the past may diverge substantially from one group to another, thus impeding the emergence of a widely accepted historical narrative that spans the perceived truths of all (cf. [Smith, 2005](#), p. 33). This is evident in places where fresh memories of violence weigh heavily on social life, such as in Lebanon. Here, as we will see, warring parties tend to take great pains to transfer their subjective truths to next generations in an attempt to garner support and legitimacy among the young, conceal atrocities committed, and authorise their views through such a powerful and internationally recognised medium as education (cf. [Hein and Selden, 2000](#), pp. 3–4; [Zembylas and Bekerman, 2008](#), p. 129).

A number of scholars have studied history education in relation to violent conflict, predominantly focusing on curriculum and textbook content. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, history textbooks 'appear to function more as a disintegrative than integrative factor in post-war reconstruction of social life' ([Baranović, 2001](#), p. 24), compelling researchers to caution that 'post-war history education seems to pave the way for future confrontations' (Höpken 1997, in [Torsti, 2007](#), p. 91). In Israel and Palestine, '[history] education [has turned] into a means for deepening the Jewish-Arab rift instead of [helping] pave a shared civility' ([Al-Haj, 2005](#), pp. 67–68; cf. [Podeh, 2000](#)). In Northern Ireland, too, students' identities keep revolving around sub-national communal identities ([Barton and McCully, 2005](#)). Finally, in Rwanda, 'the distortions of a history that the government wishes to tell, the constraints against teaching students how to be critical thinkers, and, above all, the fear of productive conflict have profound implications for the establishment of a healthy democracy in the country' ([Freedman et al., 2008](#), p. 684). Overall, academic research on history education in

conflict-affected societies has demonstrated that historiography and history teaching are highly delicate matters both in terms of content and didactic practice, and susceptible to political meddling that prioritises partisan identifications over collective ones.

Approached as site of political contestation, history education helps us understand both a conflict's perceived historic origins and fault lines (as outlined in textbooks) and its contemporary production and underlying motivations (as reflected in the battlefield surrounding its design, implementation, and reform). Curiously, however, few scholars have adopted an integrated approach to examining the linkages between history education and violent conflict. The field of educational studies tends to focus on curricula and textbook analysis, disregarding the socio-political realities in which texts are read and interpreted. Social scientists, on the other hand, in their studies of violent conflicts, rarely take either children's perspectives or their education seriously; and hardly ever do they assess students' learning materials or question the role of mass education in shaping conflict dynamics.

This article therefore positions itself at the junction of educational and social sciences: it examines the production and contents of learning materials, but also their consumption by students and teachers. It studies the history curriculum but also the political negotiations surrounding its production (or the lack thereof). History education is neither found solely in textbooks, nor in the political arena, nor in everyday classroom and playground realities; rather, it is a phenomenon that is constituted in various places and times, and by a variety of actors who, despite working with the same curriculum, attribute highly divergent meanings and practices to it. Understanding how history education is linked to violent conflict requires acknowledging the multi-sitedness and complexity of this relationship; which an ethnographic approach is well-suited to accomplish.

We now turn our attention to history education in Lebanese elementary schools, so as to ground the above observations and deepen our understanding of the intricate linkages between history education and violent conflict. Lebanon was selected as research site for its subjection to multiple layers of protracted conflict and simultaneous high educational enrolment rates.<sup>2</sup> The research focus has been on private schools, which are attended by 74 percent of Lebanese children.<sup>3</sup> While formally operating under the authority of the Ministry of Education, private schools enjoy great autonomy, partly as guaranteed by law, and especially so in the face of the absence of inspection or control from the Ministry (cf. [Shuayb, 2007](#), pp. 172–174). The subject of history is officially taught from grades six to nine to students aged 10 till 13 years (cf. [Ghosh, 2010](#)). The now following section focuses on the ways in which Lebanese children acquaint themselves with their nation's conflict-affected past.

## 5. Learning history in a context of conflict: students' perspectives

"In school, we didn't learn anything about the civil war. It is as if it didn't happen. All I know comes from what I heard in my family," narrates Maia, a South Lebanese woman in her early 20s. Her perspective mirrors what many young people told me during in- and out-of-school exchanges. The fact that the 'Lebanese war' or simply 'the events' – arguably the most influential and disrupting episode in the country's twentieth century history – is generally silenced in schools does not, however, spark indifference among students. To the contrary, I found many young Lebanese display keen awareness of civil war events, yet often without depicting

<sup>2</sup> 97% of the Lebanese school-aged children attended elementary education in 2011 (UNESCO Stats).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank EdStats for 2011.

contexts, causes or outcomes of such events, let alone of giving an impression of the war as a whole. This, evidently, is of central concern to teachers like Rana who strive to move beyond decades of violent strife. Working towards a brighter future, they argue, requires young people to be able to draw lessons from the past and understand how the past implicates present social, political, and economic conditions.

Children usually become acquainted with the civil war in the context of the family. As noted above, many families lost relatives or friends, were forced to flee their homes, or engaged in battle themselves, the memories of which continue to resonate. Still, it appears that parents are generally reluctant to share comprehensive accounts of suffering and violence with their children. Instead, they argue that their offspring should be spared the suffering of the past, and so should they themselves: “let’s focus on the future,” is the parole (cf. Haugbolle, 2005, p. 192). Parents generally seem reluctant to access the reports and archives that are available on the civil war<sup>4</sup> and, as a consequence, rely mostly on personal and their communities’ experiences as well as on what is propagated by political movements. Curious youth, confronted with silence at home and in school, may opt to tap into these alternative sources of information: political parties, more often than not bearing sectarian marks and intimate links to civil war militias, are eager to disseminate their views through internet forums, scouting groups, meetings, publications, and sports teams. Subjective civil war histories, legends, and imagery inform and colour the memories of the young, unchallenged and unmediated by school-taught, national history lessons. The sway of political parties over education can hardly be underestimated; even as direct links may be obscured behind a veil of national symbolism and ceremony.

The case of Lebanon shows what might happen in the absence of an authoritative narrative that spans ethnic or political divisions. An illustration hereof is the 2011 documentary movie *Darson fel Tareekh* (A Lesson in history) by Hady Zaccak. “History just suddenly stops,” a student tells Zaccak, “You get this feeling they think that if history is going to create a problem, then we should just forget it.” “We would love to be taught about the civil war. It was a long war and it had a great impact on Lebanon. It was terrible, and it is important that I know more about it,” a girl argues. Another student argues that “as Lebanese, we should study [the civil war] to understand its consequences, so that we don’t repeat it”. Proponents of including lessons on the civil war are met with opposition from students who caution that “if we start talking about modern history in school, hatred and problems will come out”. This fear that discussing Lebanon’s civil war will reignite hostilities reverberates widely inside and outside Lebanese schools.

Not only the civil war makes up what students consider the “real,” though silenced, history of Lebanon. A range of similarly contentious subjects is usually muted in the classroom, among which Lebanon’s troublesome relationship with Israel and the 400,000 Palestinian refugees who inhabit camps across the country. The lack of education on critical issues that impact children’s daily lives causes them to have difficulty interpreting their social and political surroundings. My research in the wake of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah showed how students in a Hezbollah-controlled suburb of Beirut complained that teachers explained little to them about the war. “All windows were shattered,” one nine-year old boy recalled, “but the teachers said nothing about it”. Upon asking why their teachers did not go

into details about the war, one student replied that “they don’t tell us anything so that we don’t remember [the war]”. Still, he assured me that everyone did remember the war and is confronted with its legacy on a daily basis (Van Ommering, 2011). Likewise, a couple of grade six and seven girls who live close to the border with Israel lamented teachers’ lack of reading of events. “We would like to understand more about the war. We did not know why Israel came, why they killed people. But we want to know!”

Students, accordingly, find themselves in a vacuum with regard to their nation’s – and family’s – recent past, a past that reverberates in the social, political, and economic crisis that Lebanon continues to confront. This vacuum is partly fuelled by political movements that ensure constant reproduction of sectarian discourse and imagery. National institutions like the Ministry of Education offer little counterweight to this phenomenon, whereas exactly the national system of education could play a decisive role in allowing children to overcome divisions, defuse ethnic or sectarian tensions, and build an overarching narrative as a foundation for coexistence, reconciliation, and economic development. Evading troublesome episodes in history lessons, however, prevents students both from understanding the socio-political conditions under which they live at present and from drawing lessons from the past.

Students’ negative appreciation of history lessons, however, does not exclusively stem from gaps in textbook content. It has as much to do with a mode of instruction that focuses on “memorising information to repeat during the exam,” as one student remarked. “We memorise the leaders, the dates, the countries; we learn them by heart because our grads depends on it. But the day after the exam, we forget everything!” In early 2013 a student posted a telling cartoon on his Facebook page (see Fig. 1), entitled “History class during school days”. The teacher asks her student “What is the Second World War?” upon which students move through stages of eagerness, confusion, and blankness before settling in a state of ‘poker face’. In a typical move the student then requests the teacher to “give me the first word”. “The,” their teacher responds. “The” makes the student reel off the exact paragraphs as memorised from his textbook: “The Second World War was an international destructive conflict that [...]” The cartoon vividly reflects didactics as witnessed in history and other classrooms in many schools, which revolves around obtaining high grades through memorising textbook content rather than appropriation and in-depth analysis of textbook and teacher’s lessons.

Students, as such, tend to receive little training in how to understand conflict as a process in time, the causes and dynamics of which can be assessed and addressed. As a consequence, many children attain non-reflexive, one-dimensional views of violent conflict as unavoidable and part and parcel of everyday normality, as I have also described elsewhere (Van Ommering, 2011). A de-historicised understanding of violence and hostility deprives young generations of the necessary tools to disentangle the contradictory and biased historical claims propagated by parents, political leaders, and politicised social organisations; in other words, to see how conflict is constructed and can, likewise, be deconstructed.

To sum up Lebanese students’ perspectives on history education, it appears that history lessons tend to be perceived as unappealing and largely irrelevant. Vital historical episodes are neglected, while didactic methods prevent students from engaging with the subject of history as historical subjects. As a result, students resort to alternative sources of information – family members, politicised media and clubs, and peers – that often reverberate one-sided or unfounded historical accounts. This results in a quandary that is neatly summarised by a student in Zaccak’s documentary (2011) who argues in favour of learning

<sup>4</sup> I have come across only one initiative to comprehensively and structurally collect, maintain, and publish civil war documentation from all warring sides, being the Beirut-based non-governmental organisation UMAM Documentation and Research ([www.umam-dr.org](http://www.umam-dr.org); [www.memoryatwork.org](http://www.memoryatwork.org)). Part of its archives were lost however as a consequence of Israeli bombardments in 2006.



Fig. 1. History class during school days. Retrieved from the Facebook page of a student on 8 March 2013; attributed to [www.michow.org](http://www.michow.org).

conflict history: “he who doesn’t know his own history will not be able to write his future.”

## 6. Teaching history in a context of protracted conflict

The perspectives of students on their history education surely raise curiosity as to the reflections of their counterparts in the classroom: how do history teachers perceive their critical position in a conflict-affected society and classrooms? Teachers operate in a highly complex web of power relations, comprising students’ interest in understanding the society in which they live; the limited contents of the national history curriculum; the didactic outlook that radiates from history textbooks and teacher training; the pressure exerted by political parties to endorse their interpretations of the past; and, finally, the personal conflict histories that teachers brings along to the classroom, shaping their capacities and perceptions. The current section will shed light on how history teachers navigate this landscape.

Teachers acknowledge their students’ fascination with “real history”. “For our students, civil war is *the* topic. At the end of the year, when we’ve finished the regular programme, students will always ask ‘can you talk about the Lebanese war now?’,” a teacher at a Christian school observed. “Students want to understand why Lebanon has so many wars,” a colleague from a majority Muslim school noted. “They are curious to learn about their society”. Teachers witness how the sectarian and polarised messages that target students outside school inevitably find their way into the classroom, compelling teachers to respond. The contradictions between the omnipresence of conflict in daily life on the one hand – missing family members, chronic physical and mental suffering, the way in which conflict has become engraved in Lebanon’s geography – and the absence hereof in education and official discourse on the other hand, confronts teachers with a intricate dilemma as to how to position themselves in relation to students, parents and colleagues, both in their professional and personal capacities.

The foremost strategy employed by teachers to confront sensitive, conflict-related issues in the classroom is evasion. “School is a place for learning, not for discussing politics” is a

phrase I frequently encountered. To account for this silence, teachers may either argue that history lessons ought to be based exclusively on the official textbook, or invoke school-wide bans on discussing ‘politics’ which sanction any reference to sectarian and political discord. Both students and teachers proved sensitised to the fact that discussing Lebanon’s past easily translates into ‘politics’ and, consequently, stirs tensions, and argue that school should be a place away from conflict. At the same time, however, they feel a clear need to express themselves as ‘politics’ and conflict are pressing issues that impact their everyday lives and future prospects.

On a less immediate level, I found a number of factors informing teachers choice to evade contentious subjects in the history classroom. To begin with, there is a system of teacher training in place that fails to equip aspiring teachers with skills to manage, contain, or solve conflicts in the classrooms. Teachers in private elementary schools do not need prior teacher training in order to be admitted to teaching positions. An undergraduate degree qualifies for teaching lower grades while a master’s degree suffices for the highest grades. Didactic and pedagogic principles and practices are supposedly taught on-the-job, not in university: “teaching is learned by doing,” I was told. Yet, generally, only high end schools pay attention to teacher training and development. In most other schools, didactic practice hinges on static memorisation instead of active engagement with learning materials. Exactly this static environment enables teachers to simply ban sensitive issues from being raised. In effect, and as we saw in Fig. 1, critical examination of historical sources and appreciation of the multiple perspectives that comprise both the present and the past, is largely nonexistent. “It’s all about names and dates: who came, who conquered, who were the leaders, when did they rule, what were their victories and defeats,” is how one teacher described a typical history lesson. The conventional history class thus offers place to neither recent history nor conflict resolution, as teachers feel unprepared to confront these subjects and entitled to ban them from the classroom.

Another element that informs teachers silencing conflict histories, is the pressure exerted by political parties. As opposed

to the Ministry of Education or other national institutes, political parties are highly active in the field of education. Through outings, scouts, political clubs, summer camps, and media outlets they actively recruit young generations for their causes. Since the Ministry itself has been implicated in sectarian power struggles, as appeared during interviews with academics and school principals, it offers little counterweight to what some teachers described as an increasing pressure from parties to conform to their lines of interpretation. “When I say something bad about one party, the student will tell his or her parents. They will then call me, or complain with the administration, or come and protest during the teacher–parent meetings. One colleague even left school because she had been too outspoken about [a certain political party]. The principal pressured her to leave. I have never heard from her since”. As such, addressing sensitive issues in the history classroom may directly impact teachers’ basic economic and social security, offering another incentive to refrain from doing so.

A third underlying motivation for teachers’ silence is found in personal experience and memories of violence. Today’s teachers often came of age during the Lebanese civil war, which has left its scars on their mental and physical conditions, family compositions, and ways of coping with imminent or distant insecurities. “The civil war scarred us for life,” one teacher from Beirut noted, “each new episode of violence brings back horrible memories”. A key strategy for coping with protracted instability and recurring conflict is expelling it from conversations or portraying it as irrelevant. Following the 2006 Israeli bombardments, teachers in affected areas “agreed that the war should not affect our work. We felt anxious and nervous, and it was very difficult, but we wanted children to experience school as normal so we hardly talked about the war”. Similarly, one principal from a South Lebanese city recalls the days of civil war, highlighting that “school went on throughout the war, throughout the fighting”. Adults, both in their capacities of teachers and parents, naturally seek to ward off conflict and violence from affecting their students and children, and school seems to be regarded a powerful tool in this regard. Accordingly, teachers’ own experiences of war and the stress and potential traumas deriving from episodes of conflict play a substantial role in shaping their capacities as actors in processes of conflict transformation.

In conclusion, teachers who participated in the present research – working in schools in predominantly Christian, Sunni, or Shi’a Muslim surroundings – chose to evade discussing contentious histories in their lessons, citing that school should be a place for learning, not politics. Their stance is informed by weak teacher training in general and the lack of conflict management and resolution education; pressure from political parties to abstain from raising national, overarching narratives that counter their interests; a fear of personal and professional repercussions of discussing conflict; as well as the difficulty faced by teachers in coming to terms with their personal, not infrequent traumatic conflict memories. As we saw in the section on students’ experiences, the vacuum that arises as a result of this silence is easily usurped by political movements whose policies and interests preclude overcoming divisions.

The now following will offer a more detailed look at Lebanon’s history curriculum and textbooks, and examine the sites where these are produced, namely the political, administrative, and academic arenas where notions of the past are spelled out, authorised, printed, and disseminated.

## 7. The war over Lebanon’s history curriculum

At the basis of history teaching in all Lebanese schools, public and private, we find the national history curriculum that was

issued by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in 1971, shortly before the outbreak of Lebanon’s 1975–1990 civil war. The curriculum has seen minor amendments in 1997 and 2000; for the most part, however, it has remained the same for more than four decades. The national history curriculum offers an overview of the historical episodes that have been deemed essential for Lebanese children to relate themselves to; these episodes revolve mainly around the major civilisations that, in one way or another, affected the territory of present-day Lebanon, among which the Phoenician, Persian, Greek, Roman, Arab, and Ottoman empires. As such, the history curriculum essentially reflects Lebanon’s political history: it focuses more on civilisations, their leaders, conquests and defeats than on social and cultural histories of, for instance, daily life, architecture, or crafts.

Its focus on political history makes the national history curriculum vulnerable to unbalanced depictions of historical eras and their meaning in the present. This comes to light when comparing the ways in which textbooks depict certain civilisations and, in particular, in the ways in which they define the links between those past civilisations and present-day Lebanon. Reviewing textbooks<sup>5</sup> written by Christian or Muslim authors, for example, reveals that Christians textbooks tend to ground Lebanon’s modern history in the Phoenician era, while Muslim-authored textbook’s foreground the era of Arab conquests and the spread of Islam (cf. [Bashshur, 2005](#)). Similarly the Christian-authored textbook adopts a positive to neutral stance towards the French presence in Lebanon following 1918, reflecting Lebanese Christians’ close ties to France; while a textbook authored by Shi’a Muslims denounces the French presence as ‘occupation’. The former celebrates Lebanon’s transition to independence and the related ‘amendment’ of the 1926 constitution, while the latter talks about a ‘battle’ against the French to obtain ‘real independence,’ which sparked the ‘cancellation’ of the original constitution.

Accordingly, while drawing on the same national curriculum, textbooks vary considerably in their representations of both ancient and recent historical events and, as such, reflect the historical identities that suit sectarian interests in the present. To be sure, interpretative variation is still contained by the fact that all national textbooks prepare students for the same national exams. Yet, on the other hand, it is augmented by the fact that the Lebanese constitution underlines ‘the rights of (religious) communities to maintain their own private schools [...] provided they conform with the general regulations issued by the State’ (article 10). This implies that private schools can use materials that cater to the specific interests of the communities they serve, provided that passages dealing with Lebanese history in foreign textbooks are approved by the Ministry of Education. With almost three out of four students attending private schools (which are not necessarily religious but do tend to cater to students with similar sectarian backgrounds and/or political preferences), the diversity of political orientations in history education is significant. In line with the tendency to interpret the national curriculum along sectarian lines, the supplementary sources used in history classes also tend to buttress a historical outlook that foregrounds Phoenician and European heritage in the case of Christian-dominated schools, and Arabism in Muslim-dominated schools ([Abouchedid and Nassar, 2000](#); [Bashshur, 2005](#), and confirmed by interviews with history teachers).

<sup>5</sup> Textbooks under review here are Hayek, Jean et al., 2009, *Scientific History, Grade 9*. Keserouan, Lebanon: Habib Publishers; and Hawi, Abdul Hussein et al., 2009, *The Clear Curriculum in History, Grade 9*. Beirut, Lebanon: Barakat Publishers. These textbooks are widely available in bookstores in Lebanon; hence I presume that they are widely used in schools, though the extent to which is hard to verify. On the basis of interviews and available literature (eg. [Bashshur, 2005](#)) I expect that a systematic review of more textbooks would render similar outcomes.

The high stakes involved in arriving at a revised national history curriculum are exemplified by the lengthy, fierce, and hitherto fruitless process of curriculum reform and unification that followed Lebanon's civil war. The 1989 Ta'ef Peace Accord, which formally ended the Lebanese civil war, stipulated that 'curricula shall be reformed and developed in a manner that strengthens national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness, and that unifies textbooks on the subjects of history and national education,'<sup>6</sup> thus highlighting the fundamental role of history education in processes of conflict transformation (cf. Dupuy, 2008). In 1998, a revised general curriculum was produced that stressed values of respect, active coexistence, and acceptance of others.<sup>7</sup> Each subject-specific curriculum was reworked as well – except for the history curriculum. Successive committees, carefully composed of historians representing the main sectarian currents in Lebanon, have been tasked with drafting a national history curriculum since 1997. Their work was 'handled almost like a state secret' (Bashshur, 2005). Still, the curricula and textbooks that were produced were invariably subjected to vehement criticism from politicians and subsequently banned by the Ministry of Education for either including, omitting, or misrepresenting certain historical episodes, among which Hezbollah's 'resistance' against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that divided the Levant in British and French mandate areas, and the 'Cedar Revolution' that pushed out the Syrian army from Lebanon in the wake of the killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri in 2005.

The most recent attempt to agree on a revised history curriculum was thwarted in March 2012 when students protesting against the draft curriculum got caught up in bloody clashes with security forces. In the face of vehement criticism from all sides and an attempt to curb further escalation, Lebanon's Prime Minister had no other choice than to "put the history book issue on hold until it acquires the endorsement of the majority of Lebanese". Consequently, the war over history education continues to date. Walid Jumblatt, a prominent politician (and one time history teacher!), even argued that the 'continuing civil war in Lebanon' should be seen as 'a war to determine the correct history of the country' (in Salibi, 1998, p. 201).

This section has summarised how the national history curriculum has been at the centre of political bickering and polarisation both among curriculum designers, textbook authors, and politicians. Successive attempts at drafting a national history curriculum have been frustrated by political forces who either refuse to face their own crimes of the past or have no interest in resolving lingering conflicts under the current power configurations. As a consequence, a pre-civil war curriculum has set the standards for history education across Lebanon for decades, offering sectarian parties substantial leverage to promote their own take on ancient and recent national history. The Ministry of Education, in as much as it would want to promote a unified history that turns the civil war into something overcome, rather than sustained, appears handcuffed by sectarian interests. The now following conclusion attempts to integrate the hitherto described perspectives and experiences of the students, teachers, and policy makers involved in the production and consumption of history lessons in Lebanon, in order to arrive at an overall understanding of the role of history education in shaping children's prospects for peace and reconciliation in a conflict-affected society.

<sup>6</sup> Ta'ef Accord, article 1/III/F/5. URL: [https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/site\\_media/war/accords/Taif\\_Accord\\_1989.pdf](https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/site_media/war/accords/Taif_Accord_1989.pdf) (accessed on 03.03.13).

<sup>7</sup> The 1998 national curriculum, URL: [www.crdp.org/crdp/French/curriculum/curriculum.asp](http://www.crdp.org/crdp/French/curriculum/curriculum.asp) (accessed on 06.05.13).

## 8. Formal history education: crossroads of past conflicts and prospects for peace

At the onset of this chapter, history teacher Rana vented her bitterness at being unable to help students overcome a legacy of antagonism and violence. We also observed students' resentment towards irrelevant and unappealing history lessons that disregard their society's "real history," compelling young generations to turn to family members and political movements to fill the blanks left by national history teaching. In view of Lebanon's continuing sectarian crisis, exacerbated by the on-going civil war in Syria, this paper asked how history education may contribute to a transition away from protracted conflict and towards a more secure and less violent future for new generations. Sadly, the analysis up to this point evokes the image that Lebanon can at best exemplify how *not* to proceed. This would however not do justice to a variety of constructive efforts that is also taking place here, as exemplified by the recently established Lebanese History Association, a number of conferences that has engaged Lebanese history teachers with their international counterparts,<sup>8</sup> and efforts to depoliticise history by NGOs like Biladi.<sup>9</sup>

Cautioning not to raise unrealistic expectations of education alone being capable of setting off major socio-political change, this case study of Lebanon has nevertheless sought to raise understanding of history education as a critical conjuncture of past conflict and future prospects, of societies recreating and changing themselves across generations, of local lived realities and political processes at national and international levels, and of structural cycles of hostility and windows for peace-building. As such, history education emerges not only as a productive lens through which to attain better understanding of the interplay between processes at micro- and macro-levels that together comprise contemporary violent conflict; it also proves a hopeful site for interventions in support of conflict transformation and peace building.

A central concern that features in students' frustrations, teachers' didactic aims and strategies, textbook content, curriculum design, and political processes, is the inclusion or exclusion of controversial historical episodes. Lebanon's civil war, for instance, is silenced by students, teachers, curriculum designers, and politicians alike; yet, paradoxically, all of them simultaneously point to this very war as the central defining element in Lebanon's history, as the era that is fundamental to understanding present-day Lebanon, and as an episode that *has* to be addressed in order to move beyond on-going sectarian hostility and trauma.

Melhem Chaoul, professor of sociology at the Lebanese University, states that "the problem with the civil war was that nobody won, and you still can't write its history because we are still not at peace" (Now Lebanon, 2009). A transition to an increased sense of national unity and peace, it seems, is mostly obstructed by the impossibility to ban the past from the present and refer it to the realm of history books; a catch-22 that is kept in place by politicians who are unwilling to confront war crimes and surrender their hold on power; but also by a popular majority that is unable or unwilling to demand and enforce fundamental political change. Instead, as has happened with regard to the civil war, both sides tend to blame outside forces and geopolitical realities for the continuous instability and fragility of the Lebanese

<sup>8</sup> Such as the European Association of History Educators EUROCLIO ([www.euroclio.eu](http://www.euroclio.eu)), which engaged in dialogues with Lebanese history teachers during the conferences 'Learning and Teaching History: Lessons from and for Lebanon' (March 2011, see [http://www.laes.org/\\_conferences.php?lang=en&id=15](http://www.laes.org/_conferences.php?lang=en&id=15), accessed on 09.05.14) and 'Teaching and Learning the Civil War' (June 2013, see <http://lebanesestudies.com/teaching-and-learning-the-civil-war>, accessed on 09.05.14).

<sup>9</sup> See [www.thisisbiladi.com](http://www.thisisbiladi.com) (accessed on 07.01.14).

state, while simultaneously waiting for these same forces to bring about positive change.

As a consequence, the changes of arriving at a national curriculum in the near future seem dim. Until that moment, students will mainly lend their ears to the “real histories” that serve the interests of the respective political/sectarian currents. These partisan explanations of the past do not only fill the blanks left by official textbooks; they also offer viable explanations for the everyday realities of sectarian hostility and insecurity. Accordingly, schools in general, and history classrooms in particular, remain essential links in the reproduction of conflict. Firstly, they are used by political parties to promote a view on history and related identifications that support the party's paradigm. Secondly, they serve as spaces where students and teachers share their experiences and perspectives – outside the scope of the no-politics-and-no-religion decrees. Lastly, apart from politicised history lessons, it is mainly what is left untaught in schools that persuades children to inform themselves on “real history” by turning to family members and political parties, who both tend to convey biased and limited interpretations of the past.

We have seen how silencing the past in history education effectively reproduces and reinforces cycles of violent conflict in Lebanon. Oppositely, in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Israel, and Palestine, it has been argued that teaching conflict histories renders similar outcomes (see Section 4, above). As both silence and discussion bear negative outcomes, an evident need exists to approach history education from new angles. We should take into account the various spheres and actors involved in the making of history education to understand their interrelations and depart from the lived realities and perceptions of conflict to develop context-specific, new methodologies of teaching and learning history: thus stimulating the development of critical attitudes, depoliticised textbooks, and comparative, international approaches of education that move history education out of the danger zone towards being an instigator of peace building in conflict-affected societies across the globe.

Three promising starting points for teaching history in conflict-affected societies have emerged from this study. Firstly, a focus on a shared social and economic past, instead of divisive political history, could strengthen overarching identifications with the nation and render these more solid and credible.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, a revision of conventional didactics and assessment that test students' capacity to memorise more than their ability to analyse and comprehend, could help students attain skills to discover, select, and evaluate historical and present sources themselves; thus finding their way in a myriad of often conflicting accounts. Both a reorientation towards socio-economic and cultural history as well as a focus on critical learning and civil responsibility can initially be applied on non-sensitive historical eras. On the long run, this would generate a basis on which to address contentious subjects in a critical and productive manner, by an empowered new generation. Thirdly, as the international conferences that were briefly alluded to have shown, history teachers exchanging experiences with colleagues from abroad who similarly deal with contentious pasts helps to broaden and deepen their understanding of the conflicts affecting their own societies, and reflect on methods to best break through cycles of distrust and violence. These three suggestions could stimulate awareness among today's students that history is inevitably subjective, as well as confidence that young generations, too, are entitled to construct a version of history that suits their interest in building a more peaceful society.

<sup>10</sup> Part of the inspiring work of the NGO 'Biladi' seeks to accomplish such by taking students to national heritage sites and creatively engaging them with Lebanon's history. See [www.thisisbiladi.com](http://www.thisisbiladi.com) (accessed on 07.01.14).

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