



# **Dealing with the Past Through Collective Memory Towards Rebuilding the Lebanese State**

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“Where to begin?” is an expression that resonates among activists, researchers and intellectuals when the topic of putting an end to the successive and accumulated crises comes up, that Lebanon has been going through for nearly three decades, if not more. Which crisis is the most severe, which is to be prioritized? Some argue that rebuilding the state is the most important issue, the one we should tackle first. This approach in turn raises several new questions:

- **Is it possible to build a State without looking at the foundations first? How do we find an answer to the question of what unites the Lebanese and makes them a unified and homogenous national society? Is the Lebanese society homogeneous as a national society, or is there something that prevents its homogeneity?**
- **Is it possible to just look towards the future, seeking to unite the Lebanese around the present; around the challenges they face in their daily lives and the future prospects that they are trying to walk towards, hand in hand?**

Some Lebanese researchers and activists believe that what caused the war in Lebanon in **1975** are the different readings of Lebanon's history and the lack of civil ethics that would unite citizens. This view was held as well by the Lebanese parliamentarians who met in Taif in **1989**. Within the framework of the Taif Agreement, the Members of Parliament agreed to unify history and the Books of civic education. However, the teaching of civic education has failed, and the subject has stalled while awaiting a serious evaluation of this experiment. The development of a unified history book, especially on the contemporary history of Lebanon, has also faltered. In light of the successive crises and their impact on Lebanon and the Lebanese, some attributed the main obstacle to the era of the Lebanese war itself, firstly in its course and secondly in its method of resolution. As the war ended the belligerents, especially the warlords, reconciled and entered into power together. All accompanied by a general amnesty law that was equivalent to saying “let bygones be bygones”. However, the wounds of the Lebanese did not heal and some thorny cases remain unresolved, especially the case of the 20,000 people who went missing during the Lebanese war. In view of the above, some researchers and thinkers saw the need to amend the memory, and more explicitly the memory of war. They believed that national reconciliation should then take place to strengthen national unity and form a solid foundation for rebuilding state and country at the same time. Opinions differed between those who advocate transitional justice and mention the experience of South Africa in that field, and those who advocate the publishing of personal narratives in reading events to liberate citizens from the subconscious traumas and violent images that these events have formed in their perceptions and imaginations.

However, some argue that publishing personal narratives will further divide the Lebanese. It may therefore be preferable to leave personal narratives aside and try to build a common and unified narrative. But who guarantees its success?

How can one amend the memory without incurring or holding anyone responsible, be it morally or politically, for what happened during those fifteen years?

### ***The Impossible Reconciliation***

However, as the issue lost importance over time, national reconciliation through the model implemented by South Africa, for example, has become impossible. But it seems that what is possible is an act of collective remorse in which the Lebanese identify with the militias spawned by their own groups and declare collective repentance for what happened during the Lebanese war. This may be an acceptable step to launch a general reconciliation among all, which in turn facilitates a return to united national community.

In the Lebanese reality, in principle, it is not possible to talk about national reconciliation and at the same time uphold transitional justice. Reconciliation is possible if there is either a parity in power, i.e., neither victorious nor defeated in the same armed conflict, or if the back and forth comes to an end and external parties other than the opponents or belligerents intervene to mediate between them.

In the case of Lebanon, the situation during the last years of the armed conflict was characterized by stagnation and seeking external mediation. It may be useful to briefly recall to two events in contemporary Lebanese history: the 1958 revolution and the 1969 crisis. During the 1958 revolution, the Marines – US Rapid Intervention Forces – intervened and a resolution on the principle of “neither victorious nor defeated” was agreed upon. Since the main subject of disagreement was Lebanon's foreign policy, which was oscillating at the time between the Nasserist line and the Cairo Pact on the one hand and the Baghdad Pact on the other, it was agreed upon to elect the then Army Commander in Chief, General Fouad Chehab, as President of the Republic. Remind, General Chehab had kept the Lebanese army out of the conflict between the two parties. On the 1969 crisis, it was between the Lebanese State and the Palestinian Armed Struggle. It was President Gamal Abdel Nasser who intervened as a mediator between the two parties.

As for the Lebanese war, the fellow Arabs intervened on several levels, most important of which was the high-level Arab delegation, consisting of the foreign ministers of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of Morocco and Algeria, and the Secretary-General of the Arab League who mediated between the belligerents and their local and international supporters. This mediation led to the convening of a Lebanese national conference that brought together Lebanese deputies in the city of Taif at the invitation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and in the presence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Syria. The conference ended with the announcement of the Taif Agreement to put an end to the Lebanese war.

### ***Transitional Justice and Accountability?***

What makes transitional justice – that is, holding some of the warlords, some of those considered war criminals or those directly responsible for mass massacres responsible – almost impossible is the way Lebanon's crises were resolved in the recent past. Neither the approach used in former Yugoslavia nor the South Africa approach are applicable in Lebanon.

Here, we refer to the path of transitional justice through the prosecution of some war criminals through the Special International Tribunal, which issued sentences against them, arrested them and imprisoned them. In South Africa, the prosecution of those responsible for the mass massacres has been accompanied by the transfer of power from one faction to another. The process of trial followed by forgiveness aimed to free the living victims and their families from the emotional burden the crimes committed against them had left behind. The presence of living victims, their relatives and witnesses at the trial sessions and their testaments before the court expressed suffering and liberated them from that suffering at the same time. It was the process of 'casting out demons' that helped to move on to forgiveness, which was embodied by the attitude and words of leaders such as Nelson Mandela. Persecuting only some leaders in the Yugoslavia war or even in the South African war and therefore holding only a few people accountable for all the atrocities was a merely symbolical expression of accountability and revenge. It is natural that some individuals bear all the criminal responsibility when it is not possible to prosecute the public or the entire population. Revisiting the circumstances of the end of World War II; that war ended with the defeat of Nazism and its allies. While some of the figures of the Nazi regime committed suicide, Nazism and its crimes were prosecuted in order to free the German people from its burden and its crime-laden conscience.

### ***The Lebanese War and Its Contextual Strategies***

The Lebanese war did not end with one side winning and the other side losing, but with a settlement between the belligerents. The military operations ended in "Neither Victorious nor Defeated" and the Lebanese Parliament took over to find a procedure that satisfied everyone, which was set down into the Taif Accord. It is worth recalling that the 1958 revolution also ended with a "neither victorious nor defeated" settlement, with the difference that the military remained completely neutral at the time, which allowed it and the Army Commander in Chief personally to be a safe haven and to be entrusted with the rebuilding of national unity. This gave the mandate of President Fouad Chehab a special impetus, in addition to his institutional vision and his firm and unequivocal neutrality. However, it should be considered that the first government formed after the 1958 revolution consisted of only four ministers, two Christians and two Muslims, who were not involved in the revolution. However, a counter-revolution was led by one of the parties and raised the slogan: "It's time to harvest" and claimed to more rightfully represent the team affected by the events. So one of the ministers was replaced by the leader of that party for things to calm down.

As for the last Lebanese war that happened between **1975** and **1990**, it has often been said that those who go to the market buy and sell and that those who did not participate in the war have no right to participate in peacemaking and reconstruction. It is a principle adopted to justify the exclusion of the vital forces in the Lebanese society that had gathered within the framework of the National Trade Union Congress between **1986** and **1988**. They had organized protest movements demanding to put an end to the war and to the paralysis of state institutions. These forces were completely ignored in the process of dialogue and negotiation to put an end to the war and implement a settlement.

This included escaping forward and ignoring reality. The core of the forces who drove the war, with the exception of extensively employing some of their former members in State institutions, forgot about their constituents, and did not pay serious attention to the issue of their rehabilitation. Rehabilitation means the adoption of necessary treatments in the areas of physical and psychological health, preparation and vocational training, preparing former militia members for their integration into normal economic life and society. Some of them chose definitive migration, while others tried to adapt to the reality of peace. Some of the militiamen kept lurking in the corners of homes and neighborhoods, posing a burden on their families and on their local community. Neither the militias nor the State itself nor the parties that had led them to engage in war once paid any attention to them.

The "You Stink" protests in 2015 may also shed light on the Lebanese tradition of amnesia and the opening of a new chapter at any moment. It should be noted that this uprising had mobilized a hundred thousand demonstrators over a period of several months. The uprising ended without any result and without an official batting an eye.

### ***October 17 – A Challenging Era***

Then the uprising/Revolution of October 17, 2019, occurred, which confirmed the Lebanese people's terrible tendency to forgetfulness and a persistent willingness to compromise. The political rotation has been replaced with power and coalition dominance, and there is no longer any accountability in the system that was founded on sectarianism and sectarian quotas. It is interesting to note that the government has never lost support from the parliament; instead, governments usually step down. All successive regimes in the post-Taif era have resigned under the pretext that their denomination needed to be more inclusively represented.

Large swaths of the Lebanese population have aspired to establish a modern, democratic state, and the revolution of October 17, 2019, came to voice those ambitions with courage and sincerity. However, it was quickly put out, and the foul waters of the corrupt regimes resumed running down the gutter. Because of short memory, subsequent outbursts do not build upon one another. There is no accumulation or increase. How is the memory of a people with loss of memory supposed to be purged? The crucial question is whether Lebanese people are holding on to their past or if they are unconsciously held captive by it, calling upon it constantly and attempting to recreate it again and again rather than learning from it. Is the saying true that Lebanese history repeats itself?

### ***State-Building and the pursuit of stability: toward a uniquely Lebanese approach to coping with the past***

The occurrence of the aforementioned incidents, as well as the assassinations and bombings that followed the Lebanese conflict, affected all sectors of the Lebanese people as well as all political forces, leading to the quasi-equation of targeting, loss, sacrifice, and martyrdom. The various parties appear to be adamant that they cannot defeat one another. Therefore, there is no longer a chance for accountability or settlement. This is the predominant Lebanese culture, strengthened by a sectarian structure built on a tension between terror and partnership.

In view of this, even recourse to international jurisdiction does not seem sufficient. The Special International Tribunal was established to look into the killing of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his companions that occurred on the 14th of February 2005. After more than 17 years of inquiries, reports, and defenses, it condemned many defendants in absentia while ignoring the instigators. The reliance on special tribunals as done in former Yugoslavia or South Africa is not encouraged by this experience.

The Lebanese approach to dealing with the past lies in the center between turning to it to establish a basis for national unity and running from it dismissively. History won't strengthen the Lebanese sense of oneness. Like most nations in Africa and the Middle East, Lebanon is a composite state and less organic than nations in Western Europe. What the people of Lebanon have in common is the present, and possibly the future. Maybe, coming together and adopting logical and scientific measures to address the issues affecting all the Lebanese, can be a result of the current difficulties. Maybe the ideals of non-violence, dialogue, and acceptance of diversity could be easily propagated, since nowadays everyone knows that all are impacted by conflicts and that no one has ever gained anything from them.

### ***The Path for a Reconciliated Memory***

The only method of healing the wounds caused by the war that can console live victims and their families is collective remorse, not transitional justice.

A comprehensive strategy is required that is adopted by the state and in which everyone takes part.

This strategy ought to include three aspects at once:

- 1.** Assuming communal moral responsibility for murders, abductions, disappearances, and liquidations rather than a criminal liability. A comprehensive national gathering that includes all political and civil forces will enable this. We advise that it be April 13 of each year, which is the date the Lebanese conflict began, during which regret is declared on the one hand and forgiveness on the other. Also a national day should be devoted to the martyrs and the missing. A statue representing every martyr and all the missing should be put up by the state and placed in a public park in Beirut alongside a list of their names.

- 2.** The State must create a fund to compensate veterans, survivors and the families of victims, the missing and the fallen. This fund can be funded by a fiscal mark called "Tribute to the Missing Living in Our Memory."

- 3.** To promote better rapprochement between the Lebanese and the various regions, the state should implement a well-balanced development strategy that ensures bridging the gaps and differences. It seems to us that rapprochement through well-balanced development supported by the state is entirely different from what is suggested in terms of increased decentralization, which aims further strengthen the autonomy of each group.






In Lebanon, a unique approach for properly addressing the Lebanese past, both recent and ancient, is to be found, which must be adjusted to the customs and dynamics of the Lebanese people. The Lebanese people can recall from their past shining examples of behavior that promote national unity in light of their current needs. The Lebanese must understand above all else that they are stronger when they are united and weaker and more easily set against each other when scattered. Taking on a rational stand, guided by the intellectual elites, might be enough to turn a revised second edition of Lebanon into the Switzerland of the east.

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