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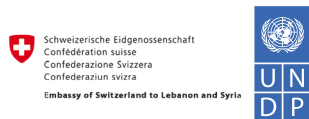
Policy Paper

Lebanon's History Teaching: A Strategy for the Way Forward

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Lebanon's History Teaching: A Strategy for the Way Forward

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Introduction

'Few issues in Lebanon are as contested as its national history. Every sect has its own version of the civil wars', wrote Hannah Wettig in the Daily Star back in 2004.¹ Today, more than 30 years after the end of the 1975-1990 war, the education system still lacks a reformed history curriculum. The absence of such a curriculum continues to draw polarized positions and visions.

Situated at the crossroads of the Middle East, Lebanon's history is characterized by a diverse array of influences, conflicts, and coexistence, making the teaching of history a nuanced and sensitive endeavor. Against the backdrop of a complex sociopolitical context, educators grapple with the challenges of building a collective national memory while nurturing an inclusive understanding of the past that embraces the country's religious and cultural diversity.

Moreover, the realm of history teaching in Lebanon is multifaceted, where the dynamic interplay between Lebanon's various religious communities adds another layer of complexity to history teaching. Religious educational institutions, deeply rooted in the country's social fabric, have a profound influence on how history is taught, shaping the narratives and interpretations that students encounter.

Administrative obstacles emerging from rivalries among ministers, politicized appointments to the National Curriculum Committee and the inability of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's (MEHE) and the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) to play a more effective role in this regard have further complicated the situation. Finally, conflicting and conflictual narratives in teaching the 19th and 20th century history, per the existing curriculum, and the difficulty in dealing with conflictual historical dates such as the civil conflicts of 1860 and 1958, to name a few, further complicate the problem at hand.

In today's complicated Lebanese context, this policy paper addresses the imperative task of navigating the complexities of the overlooked issue of history teaching which holds the extraordinary potential of fostering critical thinking, promoting cultural understanding, and instilling a sense of shared heritage.

The paper begins by presenting the research methodology and conceptual framework used, it then expands on the challenging endeavor of teaching history in societies emerging from a conflict. To do so, it focuses on the management of competition and coordination

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Wettig, H. (2004). Is the latest version of the national history fit to print? *The Daily Star*, August 2, 2004.

around education systems and content versus method around teaching history. It then delves into critically assessing teaching history in Lebanon. This is done through examining the 'no winner, no loser' paradigm and its impact on the education sector during post-conflict reconstruction and by reviewing past policies and initiatives. Last, it assesses political, institutional, and societal enabling factors towards developing history teaching in Lebanon, before offering concluding remarks and policy recommendations for a strategy for the way forward.

I Methodology

In 2023, the Forum for Memory and Future (FMF), a national actor that is comprised of organizations and individuals working on the issue of Dealing with the Past, such as transitional justice, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, history, memorialization and enforced disappearances; commissioned the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) to study the progress made in the area of history teaching in Lebanese schools and issue policy recommendations for concrete advocacy actions.

To develop this policy paper, LCPS, in close coordination with the FMF, adopted a participatory approach, reaching out to representatives of different entities concerned through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), including the Center for Educational Research and Development, representatives of organizations actively involved in different aspects of history education such as the Lebanese Association for History (LAH), academic experts and focal points from political parties who have dealt with the question of history teaching. Due to the overwhelming crisis situation the country is going through, most administrators from religious educational institutions apologized for not being able to participate in the consultation process. Their perspective and outlooks were drawn from previous research work achieved by LCPS experts and thorough monitoring of their statements and activities from open data sources. As a result, the LCPS carried out 10 KIIs, 6 experts on the issue, 3 political party representatives, and the head of the CERD.

LCPS organized a roundtable on June 8, 2023, with the participation of 24 experts and academics specialized in the education sector, who have worked specifically on the issue of history teaching in the country. This fieldwork complemented a thorough desk research, encompassing a literature review of the issue of history teaching, drawing on legal and administrative documentation, academic publications, policy reports, and media articles.

II Conceptual Framework of Ethnic Politics

Among the key issues raised is the role history teaching can effectively play in helping individuals and societies confront and grapple with their past. By engaging with history through education, societies can address unresolved conflicts, acknowledge injustices, and confront difficult truths while dealing with the past. That said, the question remains on the feasibility of such endeavor in deeply fragmented societies, such as Lebanon, where history teaching turns into matter for political and sectarian bickering, serving different objectives under the banners of state-building, nation-building, civil peace or reconciliation. This is not a new phenomenon, as *‘for most of the last two decades, theory and research in history education has been part of the larger constructivist tradition in education and psychology’*.²

Working on the Bosnian context, Baranović argues that *‘the content of the school curricula (textbooks) is a key indicator of the way in which schools prepare the young for participation in social life, and that the school curricula can potentially be used to teach tomorrow’s adults to build peace and promote the development of civil society in the post-war situation’*.³

On the other side, the literature also notes that nation-building objectives often overestimate the impact of history education on children and new generations. Academics remind us that *‘neither children nor adults passively absorb information, whether at school or elsewhere. Rather, they engage in a process of active construction in which they interpret new information—encountered in a variety of formats and settings—in light of their prior ideas and their ongoing attempts to make sense of the world’*.⁴ Hence, *‘people do not simply construct their understanding of history as a series of discrete facts, but rather imbue them with meaning by connecting facts to each other and to broader patterns or themes’*.⁵

For instance, in Northern Ireland where Unionist and Nationalists have clashed over history education, even after the Good Friday agreement, a study acknowledged that *‘schools may be able to play an important role in helping them develop perspectives on the past that are grounded in inquiry, evidence, and multiple viewpoints’*⁶ but concluded that they *‘may not always succeed in this task, because as students move through the required curriculum, their identification with Unionist or Nationalist history actually intensifies, and they appear to draw selectively from the school curriculum in order to bolster their*

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Barton, K. C. & McCully, A. W. (2005). History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: an empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspectives, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37:1, p. 90. Cf. also Levstik, L. S. And Barton, K. C. (2001) *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle School*, 2nd edn (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates)

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Baranović B. (2001). History Textbooks in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Intercultural Education*, 12:1, p. 14.

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Barton, K. C. & McCully, A. W. (2005). History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: an empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspectives, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37:1, p. 90. Cf. also Levstik, L. S. And Barton, K. C. (2001) *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle School*, 2nd edn (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).

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Barton, K. C. & McCully, A. W. (2005). History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: an empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspectives, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37:1, p. 90.

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Keith C. Barton & Alan W. McCully (2005). History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: an empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspectives, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37:1, p. 110.

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Keith C. Barton & Alan W. McCully (2005). History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: an empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspectives, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37:1, p. 111. *Educational Review*, 32(3), 245–257.

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Interview over Zoom on September 5th 2023.

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Interview over Zoom on September 5th 2023.

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Interview over Zoom on September 5th 2023.

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Hourani R. B. (2017). A Call for Unitary History Textbook Design in a Post-Conflict Era: The Case of Lebanon, *The History Teacher*, February 2017, Vol. 50, No. 2, p. 255.

developing understanding of partisan historical narratives.⁷ As such, the National History curriculum may just as well fuel sectarian and ideological differences, whose roots run much deeper than the school system and teachers' skills transmitting a given history curriculum.

Other experts have developed approaches addressing more directly the students' interests rather than ideological interests, as most agree how history teaching in schools constitutes a '*crucial element*' for them, which goes beyond nationhood purposes or communal transmissions. History, explains Dr. Amine Elias, helps children appreciate a '*consciousness of time, allowing them to cherish time, the past, the present and develop their own relation to time*'.⁸ Through history teaching, educational experts maintain that students will acquire the '*necessary tools to build citizenship and values, critical thinking, team building and group work*'.⁹ With that comes a '*responsibility to preserve peace, stability, social cohesion*'.¹⁰

Such challenging approaches pertaining to history teaching are common in countries emerging from a conflict and having to endure disputed memories and narratives, as they are compelled to design accommodation mechanisms and processes to reach agreed upon objectives for history teaching. Their priorities can hence be reshuffled based on political priorities and agreements, while not necessarily including the crucial need of dealing with the past.

As such, in deeply fragmented societies, this issue constitutes a larger topic than dealing with children and school systems and a much more sensitive topic pertaining to an environment of disputed memories, where 'heroes' and 'foes' are differentiated depending on which side of the conflict one belongs to.

Therefore, the conceptual framework attached to history education does not account to a simple technical matter on how to best represent the nationhood's constitutive narrative. It is rather a political struggle to fight and prevent any obstacles that might hinder the right to transmit cultural inheritance. In Lebanon, these considerations continue to be a real '*jeopardy regarding unified history textbooks [as] the existing textbooks continue to be a catalyst for mono-ethnic centrism*'.¹¹

In an attempt to conciliate the contradicting theoretical conceptions related to the objectives of history education, the paper will further explore the challenges pertaining to history teaching in societies emerging from a conflict, before offering a review on the situation as it evolved in Lebanon. The paper will attempt to identify potential

factors that would enable movement on the issue of history teaching in Lebanon as a tangible pathway to deal with the country's tormented past.

III Teaching History in Societies Emerging from a Conflict: A Challenging Endeavor

The Management of Competition over Education Systems

Van Ommering reminds us how *'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.'*¹²

In the wake of conflict, the realm of history in a society bears the indelible scars of violence, division, and turmoil. Teaching history in such societies is a formidably challenging task, one that demands a delicate balance between acknowledging painful truths and fostering a sense of unity and reconciliation.

In societies emerging from conflict, history teaching represents a vital component of education, while presenting a unique and critical dimension under which political leaderships need to manage the sectarian and ethnic competition over education systems.

This phenomenon is well observed in Lebanon as history education has been the object of many consensus-building initiatives (some actually successful), while at the same time acknowledging the transmission of historical narratives as an existential component for each religious community. Ever since the establishment of Greater Lebanon, its constitutional order has granted to each of the communities the prerogative of developing their own schools, as Article 10 of the Constitution underlines *'the rights of communities to maintain their own private schools [...] provided they conform with the general regulations issued by the State'*.

Such rights have consolidated a traditional competition among sectarian establishments on State institutions levels, as each would seek to pass on its own interpretations of historic events and narratives through its schools' network. And to *'conform with general regulations issued by the State'* means to foster control or seek consensus within State institutions, which can lead to forms of confrontation and coordination.

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Van Ommering E. (2015). Formal history education in Lebanon: Crossroads of past conflicts and prospects for peace, *International Journal of Educational Development*, 41, p. 201.

In Lebanon, where power-sharing arrangements constitute the backbone of the political regime, most political and sectarian formations would be represented under a State-led umbrella, such as national committees on history teaching, under which all levels of competition can be managed. Any output from these negotiations and discussions, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), need to respect the compelling clauses under the Taif Agreement of 1989, which stipulated that *'private education shall be protected and state control over private schools and textbooks shall be strengthened'*¹³, and 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'*.¹⁴

Hence, each party would defend a particular interpretation of historic events, usually attached to sectarian configurations and their existential concerns. Should an agreement occur at this national level, schools, whether public or private, would implement the agreed upon curriculum, just like in other disciplines. However, for history teaching, no political understanding, even when reached, could ever be turned into an actual policy since the end of the civil war.

As such, the unwritten rules of sectarianism in the Lebanese decision-making process makes actual reforms extremely difficult to achieve, despite the constructive and inclusive debates and discussions that would be set up. During the roundtable organized in June 2023, experts agreed about the *'slow'* and *'inefficient'* features of the coordination efforts on that level in Lebanon, without dismissing their importance.

Furthermore, policy discussions around history education would also address questions around *'what to teach'* (the content) and *'how to teach it'* (the method), in an attempt to strike a right balance that would achieve some kind of consensus.

Content vs. Methods in History Teaching

In fragmented societies, political leaderships will strongly object to the unification of history textbooks and denounce an *'inappropriate interference of the state with educational affairs'*¹⁵. Others would fear that a unification will only produce programs with the smallest common denominator, hence a poor-quality curriculum with little educational value.¹⁶ As a result, history as a research discipline, shaped by historians

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Taif Agreement, National Conciliation Document, approved by the Lebanese Parliament on November 4, 1989, section III-F-3.

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Taif Agreement, National Conciliation Document, approved by the Lebanese Parliament on November 4, 1989, section III-F-5.

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Cf. Kriener, J. (2012). Different Layers of Identity in Lebanese Textbooks. In Alayan, S. et al (2012). The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula, Berghahn Books Incorporated, p. 131. Cf. Harik, I. (1999). On the Nature of the State and its Responsibilities, in The State and Education in Lebanon. Ed. Munir Bashshur. Beirut: LAES, pp. 13-38 (Arabic).

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Cf. Wehbe, N. (2003). *Ahfad bila Judud. Qadhaya Kitabat at-Tarikh*. Beirut, pp. 68-92.

and social scientists, does not necessarily end up as the material used in history textbooks, and which adoption relies on political compromise.

The stakes are rather high as the outcomes of any curriculum reform without a large political compromise would *'reflect the ideology of the State'*, i.e. the cultural majority in power, with the risk it wouldn't *'represent an inclusive approach'*—as mentioned during the roundtable. Such worries continue to foster cautiousness and obstacles to any formal reform process on the issue. In the absence of effective progress on that level, the result is that *'we don't see the same history'*, as indicated by a representative of a party in government, so *'in theory we have one curriculum but in practice schools are part of political and sectarian context, and they are not teaching the same content'*.¹⁷

Plural societies face the challenge of overcoming such divisiveness over what to teach in history classes in schools. As such, the quest of compromise over the curriculum content can represent an opportunity for the different political formations to defend the preservation of coexistence and stability. In Northern Ireland for instance, *'educators and policymakers [...] frequently look to the formal study of history as a way of countering such divisiveness. They hope that history education can diminish young people's acceptance of narrow or partisan perspectives on the past, either by providing them with neutral and balanced portrayals of controversial historical issues or by emphasizing non-politicized skills of academic study'*.¹⁸

The Shared Education Initiative, initiated after the Good Friday agreement, stands as a good example of ways to address historical divisions and promote a more inclusive understanding of the region's past. This initiative recognizes the significance of history education in shaping perceptions, narratives, and attitudes toward the complex history of Northern Ireland and is widely recognized for its efforts to promote collaboration, understanding, and integration among students from diverse backgrounds.

In Lebanon, similar compromise-building efforts have been observed many times in the area of history teaching, in the form of several national committees enacted by the Council of Ministers. Most of these committees have greatly struggled to issue a unified curriculum for history teaching that would be the product of political compromise. To counter the risk of hitting 'deal breakers' in future attempts, the idea of introducing 'multiple narratives' to a history curriculum is being openly discussed, though considered by some experts as contradictory with the

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Interview over Zoom, August 15th, 2023.

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Barton K. C., McCully A. W. (2005). History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: an empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspectives, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37:1, p. 85.

Taif stipulations of developing 'unified' history and civics textbooks.

Other experts circumvent that issue by proposing a standard curriculum inclusive of contradicting interpretations of historic events and developments, the way Northern Ireland have. Rwanda offers a slight variation of this model as efforts were made to revise the history curriculum to provide a more nuanced and inclusive portrayal of history, in order to acknowledge the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives within Rwandan society.

As discussions over history teaching content remain divisive, stakeholders turn to consolidating common positions in the educational methods to be applied in this field, which are no longer relevant in a modern world. For Dr. Ali Khalife, *'the textbooks relied upon in the school networks are a burden for teachers and bring zero impact from an educational perspective, as the 'learning by heart' method does not allow for any analysis or research'*.¹⁹

Teaching techniques and methods are increasingly considered as adequate tools to absorb differential narratives and ideological disputes. Academics have shown how the liberal approach to education consolidates the concept of collective choices, therefore, *'school education in the humanities and social science disciplines has to enable students to make choices, i.e. teach them skills of differentiation, consideration of alternative views and morals, rational and dialectical argument, etc.'*²⁰ Thus, Lebanese civil society has been intensively investing in training public school teachers, in addition to designing methodological sheets and workbooks to help history teachers better engage with students and develop their critical thinking rather than memory citation of dates and events.²¹

During the experts' roundtable, the teaching techniques constituted a major topic of discussion, calling for an *'bjective approach'* based on evidence gathering, facts, documented sources, and ways to train and trust students on the handling of information. Dr. Antoine Messarra refers to such techniques as the *'Socratic method, as opposed to preaching'*²² a specific take on events, which focuses on the students' building of critical thinking rather than attempting to influence their views and opinions.

In Lebanon, stakeholders are still struggling with defining a conceptual framework that would strike a balance between the development of a curriculum content and the educational methods to best transmit historical material. The following section offers a review of the Lebanese recent experience with this issue.

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Interview in Beirut on 27 July 2023.

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Kriener, J. (2012). Different Layers of Identity in Lebanese Textbooks. In Alayan, S. et al (2012). The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula, Berghahn Books Incorporated, p. 132.

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Cf. for instance the *'Massarouna'* Booklets that were launched by the Lebanese Association for History in August 2022 to serve as teachers guide to enhance the teaching techniques related to history classes, source: <https://lahle-banon.org/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%87%d9%8a%d9%91%d8%a6%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%84%d8%a8%d9%86%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%8a%d9%91%d8%a9-%d9%84%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%ae-%d8%aa%d8%b7%d9%84%d9%82-%d8%af%d9%84%d9%8a%d9%84/>

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Interview in Beirut, 24 July 2023.

IV Teaching History in Lebanon, a Critical Assessment

The 'No Winner No Loser' Paradigm, and its Impact on the Education Sector During Post-Conflict Reconstruction

With the end of the civil war, the Lebanese political establishment, tightly controlled by Syrian forces, announced the reconsolidation of civil coexistence among the country's sectarian components as it launched the pacification and post-reconstruction phase. As mentioned before, the National Conciliation Document, complementing the constitutional framework, has touched upon the educational sector, trying to align with the new balance paradigm.

On one hand, it raised history and civic education teaching as part of state-building, while the Constitution's provisions kept those provisions regarding sectarian institutions' rights to manage their own schools and educational networks. On the other, religious educational institutions don't see any contradictions in that particular framework, as they regularly highlight how their work is aligned with the country and the State's national interests, in addition to producing quality education, inclusive of children from all religious backgrounds.²³

Additionally, the sectarian institutions running these establishments are very keen on bringing forward their collaborative stance with the MEHE and the CERD. In the absence of a clear enforced policy by the government over history teaching, private schools cannot be blamed for their longtime use of differentiated and conflicting history textbooks and educational material, even during the course of the civil war.

Former head of CERD, Dr. Nemr Freiha, had revealed the competing character of such narratives. As he surveyed 25 different history textbooks published after the 1968-71 curricular reform and *'found that books published for schools with a Christian identity focused more on the events related to the independence of Lebanon, Phoenician influence on the Lebanese culture and Christian-related political figures as heroes. Schools with a Muslim identity used history books that gave more emphasis to the Arab League, pro-Arab politicians and perceptions of injustice to Muslims during state-formation of Lebanon'*.²⁴

Back in 2012, Kriener surveyed around forty series of history textbooks circulating in Lebanon in the various schools run by religious institutions, containing different depictions of the country's path towards independence.²⁵ Without central institutions agreeing on a unified curriculum in association with the relevant stakeholders,

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Cf. El Mufti, K. (2014). Religious Education and/or the Making of a Citizen: The Case of Lebanon, in Hanf T., El Mufti K. (2014). Policies and Politics of Teaching Religion, Nomos.

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Akar, Bassel (2022). Unlocking History Curriculum Reform in Lebanon, in Elias, A. (2022). Towards a Path of History Education Improvement in Lebanon Summaries and Recommendations of the Conference 'Talks about the Trends and Approaches for History Education in Lebanon, 2021', Lebanese History Association, UNDP, p. 37.

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For more details on the analysis of the textbooks' content, cf Kriener, J. (2012). Different Layers of Identity in Lebanese Textbooks. In Alayan, S. et al (2012). The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula, Berghahn Books Incorporated, pp. 131-153.

schools are rising to the frontlines to determine the best way of establishing an attachment of the younger generations with their homeland's history.

As a result, history teaching remains an object of political dispute in Lebanon, with each group defending their own perspectives and interests over the issue. At the same time, the post-war period wasn't geared towards fostering reconciliation and dealing with the past, adding another layer of difficulty which history teaching has to address. One specific chapter represents the unconditional amnesty law enacted by the Parliament in 1991 over the war's atrocities, except for crimes against religious and political figures. This historic segment was qualified during the roundtable as '*efforts to impose amnesia*' and a '*war against the memory of Lebanese*'.

To associate the issue of dealing with the past to building a modern history curriculum, it is imperative that all political and sectarian groups remain part of a participatory approach, since any initiative on developing a curriculum's narrative by one side would be considered by the other groups as a direct and existential threat, resulting in a stalemate on the subject.

This is why history teaching is depicted as '*the most complex issue in the Lebanese education field*' as explained by Dr. Nemr Freiha²⁶, and is deemed '*not conducive to national integration*'.²⁷ Given the contradicting dynamics, the Taif provisions were not implemented, '*because we cannot agree on a new social contract for Lebanon and the differences of views upon the destiny, the society, the vision for the future*', as per Dr. Amine Elias comments, considering the issue needs a '*political solution on a macro level*'.²⁸ He also acknowledges how '*we missed a critical opportunity in the 1990s to prepare new post-conflict generations to rebuild the country, and now the country is completely destroyed and we are back to square one*'.²⁹

As such, the post-war political compromise was not solid enough, nor inclusive enough since '*Christian parties were marginalized under the Syrian occupation*' as explained by a party representative from the opposition³⁰, to secure the enactment of a unified history curriculum despite the multiple attempts in designing one like we shall explain in the next section.

²⁶
Interview in Beirut on 24 July 2023.

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Abouchedid K., Nasser R. (2000). The State of history teaching in private-run confessional schools in Lebanon: implications for national integration, *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol.5(2), p. 74.

²⁸
Interview on Zoom, 5 September 2023.

²⁹
Interview on Zoom, 5 September 2023.

³⁰
Interview on Zoom, 17 August 2023.

Review of Past Policies and Initiatives

Because of the political stalemate over history education reform, public and private schools are left teaching the initial 1968-71 history curriculum, despite some attempts to revise it after the civil war. In 2000, a new curriculum was enacted but was discontinued in 2002 after a failure to produce a unified textbook due to political interference. A third attempt was conducted in 2010, focusing mainly on the secondary level but also resulted in political adversity and the continuous stalemate over the enforced curriculum.

These attempted reforms were spearheaded through the establishment of specialized committees comprised of experts, before representatives of political parties were invited to join the discussions, which gives an indication as to the vested interest of political formations in such endeavor. In 1996, a first committee was appointed by the Council of Ministers, which working principles resonated with those of the MEHE's conference of April 1991, emphasizing on Lebanon's national identity, the principle of nation-building, its connection to the Arab region, and what the country is bringing to the development of civilization. In total, between 1996 and 2010, no less than five committees worked on developing a history curriculum.³¹

Heading the fourth committee of 2002, Dr. Nemr Freiha, was running the CERD back then. He has extensively documented his work in that period, expressing deep frustration both at the experts' roundtable and in the course of his interview. The committee's effort led to the *'production of 11 textbooks through the collaboration with 42 experts working within CERD despite high political interference'*. However, Dr. Freiha considers such achievements were discarded due to direct political intervention, thus leading to his dismissal as head of the CERD *'for political reasons'*.

Every committee has embodied the initiative of a different education minister without eventually reaching the envisaged reforms. Every time, the curriculum or textbooks are thrown away given how the *'devil lies in the details'*, as explained by participants during the roundtable; so *'even when a Minister shows strong political will, all the work just goes to waste when the Cabinet changes, and we are back to square one each time'*. In some occurrences, it is the Minister who pulls the plug from the work achieved by the standing committee due to political and sectarian interference. In others, the resignation of the government breaks up the committee's efforts.

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Cf. Abdel Massih, S. (2022). Lebanon's History Curriculum Crisis and How to Get out of It, in Elias, A. (2022). Towards a Path of History Education Improvement in Lebanon Summaries and Recommendations of the Conference 'Talks about the Trends and Approaches for History Education in Lebanon, 2021', Lebanese History Association, UNDP, pp. 43-54.

These disparities are still valid today as stakeholders can be divided, irrespectively of their status of experts or political representatives, between those supporters of a unified and centralized textbook and those pushing for teaching multiple narratives to develop critical thinking.

Arguments for both approaches are numerous: the first group believes its approach constitutes the only way to create a shared and collective memory, thus consolidating national unity and citizenry. In their view, teaching different versions of history would signify 'multiple loyalties', as opposed to the celebration of a national community. The other group looks to achieve the inclusion of multiple historical perspectives to provide a broader understanding of historical events. This would involve acknowledging and integrating different interpretations and narratives, avoiding the dominance of any one sectarian or political viewpoint.

At the same time, both approaches hold limitations and potential shortcomings. Multiple narratives would be bestowed to the ones checked by the various influential political groups at a given period, but such interests (and narratives) will surely evolve in the future, holding history teaching hostage of subjective viewpoints based on a given balance of power that the education system should have no role into. On the other hand, we can firmly establish that a standardized approach stands little chances of succeeding in Lebanon given the fragmented nature of the country, as it could affect stability and coexistence.

The question remains as to determine the entry points to ensure some advancement on the front of history teaching, which has been systematically disrupted for so long. The next section will attempt to establish the different enabling factors fostering the development of history teaching in Lebanon.

V Enabling Factors Towards Developing History Teaching in Lebanon

Political Factors

In a heterogeneous society like Lebanon, it is not realistic to envisage a successful reform over history teaching without the agreement of all political parties, which constitutes a key consideration in any future policy reform agenda.

Party representatives met in the course of this research all confirmed the *'need for a political consensus before any educational consensus*

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Interview over Zoom, 15 August 2023.

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Interview on Zoom, 17 August 2023.

34
Interview on Zoom, 4 September 2023.

35
Interview in Beirut on 27 July 2023.

36
Interview on Zoom, 4 September 2023.

37
Interview in Dekweneh, 3 August 2023.

can be achieved' (representative of a party in power)³², in addition to systematically associating *'experts, historians and political representatives to ensure the proper understanding of each group's narrative'* (representative of a party in opposition)³³. Another representative of a party in opposition insisted on the need to associate all stakeholders to reach an *'objective narrative because each has his own point of view'*.³⁴

The experts' perspective holds the same realistic view on how inescapable the political context remains under such endeavor. On the question of whether this is achievable, the consultations showed both optimistic and pessimistic stands. Dr. Ali Khalife sees *'little political opportunities for this today as a momentum still needs to be determined over this'*.³⁵ A representative from a party in opposition stated that political groups *'were not ready for this and a compromise cannot be reached'*, pointing to the fact that even *'teachers might want to stir the class orientation based on his/her affiliations. We do not agree on political views, nor on fundamentals of where we come from and where we are going nor as Lebanese. Today the balance of power is not fair, so instinctively we remain defensive'*.³⁶ For the CERD however, Dr. Ishac sees *'no real political obstacles so far, we have set a direction but we also need to consult a lot'*³⁷, as she puts forward her office's collaboration with civil society organizations on this issue, among which is the Lebanese Association for History.

At the same time, Lebanon has shown a good experience in terms of experts and political delegates working together in the different committees that were formed in the past, during which new curricula had been achieved and textbooks even produced before these efforts were quashed at a higher political level. That said, the formation of any new committee will also have to wait the unlocking of the present institutional vacuums: to say the least the election of a President and the formation of a new Cabinet.

Irrespective of the right context, no real political obstacle exists to prevent any future committee delving into the question of history teaching to gather all the different stakeholders. The challenge is to allow for this national process to survive long enough and reach an actual implementation phase. For this, an influential public opinion would have to be shaped to prevent the issue from being sidetracked. By mobilizing strong grassroots base in favor of the outcome of future history teaching initiatives, the relevant authorities would not have the same leeway to block the reforms.

Institutional Factors

Historically, Lebanon has developed strong institutional capacities in the education sector, with a consolidated network of public schools. The CERD is very active in the area of curriculum development and the provision of resources to teachers and experts. As the country is crumbling as a result of the ongoing multidimensional crisis, the institutional capacities of the State, and thus its education services, have considerably decreased. Thanks to the contribution of the World Bank (loans and donations), the education sector was recently able to maintain some improvement on the level of curriculum reform with the enactment of the 'National Framework for General Educational Curriculum for Pre-University Levels' and ensure the payment for development of E-book applications to replace the costly paper print-outs of textbooks.

Despite the promising predispositions under such important achievement, as mentioned by many experts met, the issue of history teaching remains absent from the present formal pipelines at that level, as confirmed by CERD president Dr. Heyem Ishac,³⁸ as there exist no clear initiative by the MEHE or the caretaker Cabinet. Nevertheless, the CERD and other institutional actors should be approached in order to foster momentum and support towards revitalizing policy discussions over history teaching.

At the same time, the CERD is ready to mobilize and gather the necessary resources to make headway in the area of teaching methods and techniques, based on disciplinary approaches which include building historical thinking, reflective thinking, historical concepts, research skills, multiple perspectives, constructivism, and active learning. All these pedagogical aspects enjoy unanimous support in both institutional and educational fields. Hence, CERD's President Dr. Hiyam Ishac defends "*new ways of teaching history today to develop inquisitive minds among students*"³⁹, acknowledging the fact that inverted classroom techniques allow for blended learning, aiming to increase student engagement and work on research and problem-solving skills during class time. These aspects are highlighted throughout the '*National Framework for General Educational Curriculum for pre-university levels*' launched by the MEHE in November 2022, with the support of the World Bank.

Hence, in parallel to pushing for institutional processes to discuss history curriculum, investing in the tracks of teaching methods can

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Interview in Dekweneh, 3 August 2023.

39
Interview in Dekweneh, 3 August 2023.

constitute a promising and fulfilling field. During the round table, experts pointed to the fact that there was *'no need to wait for a unified curriculum, based on political decisions which might never come'* and warmed to the idea to *'open up new lenses, new doors, new historic fields, looking into the people's history, not necessarily a rigid book'*. Dr. Antoine Messarra suggested students be sent on quests to *'explore their own family's history or study the story behind street names in their cities and areas'*⁴⁰, hence consolidating a ratchet effect in which this type of teaching will actually impact behaviors and allow for younger generations to start *'dealing with the past'* at their own level, in their own ways. As Dr. Messarra put it, *'Memory is much larger than teaching history'*⁴¹, but it's a good place to start.

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Interview in Beirut, 24 July 2023.

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Interview in Beirut, 24 July 2023.

These teaching methods crucially rely on the teachers, who *'constitute the backbone of such project'*, as pointed out by Dr. Amine Elias. They are the ones who would help bring about better citizens and human beings by abandoning *'traditional heavy teaching'* and rather align with the *'students' needs and perspectives, and providing them with the tools of critical thinking, analytical and research skills'*.

That said, one must keep in mind the excruciating situation of teachers today whose wages are now worthless, as Dr. Khalife fears *'they might not be geared for these workshops today'*⁴², unless approached with strong incentives. Teachers have had an incredibly difficult school year in 2022-2023 struggling for better recognition and adaptation of their salaries and work conditions through a long series of strike movements that took up almost 4 months out of the school year calendar. *'The crumbling of the micro-level of teachers was not properly dealt with,'* explains Dr Khalife,⁴³ as this could constitute a challenge to firmly engage wider networks of teachers in reforming history teaching methods in classes.

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Interview in Beirut on 27 July 2023.

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Interview in Beirut on 27 July 2023.

Societal Factors

In Lebanon, historians form a very vibrant and dynamic community whose works are fundamental to understand the past, consolidate collective memory, challenge assumptions, educate future generations, and even promote accountability and justice. They serve as custodians of the past, interpreters of historical events, and educators who enrich our understanding of the world and our place in it. Their work helps Lebanese learn from history, navigate the complexities of the present, and make informed decisions for the future.

At the same time, families and parents form another set of actors on this issue, which experts often point at to reflect the complexity and also limitations of the genuine objectives of teaching history in schools. During the round table, experts noted how *'pressure from parents can be usually greater obstacles than political actors'*, as family circles represent the first and primordial unit of transmission of culture, memory and the past. Political parties also justify their role and interventions in the reform process as a way to prevent any civil strife, as the specific content of a history textbook might ultimately flare up reactions down the line from families based on what their sons and daughters would be reporting back home from school.

As such, history teaching represents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can lead the road towards real reconciliation if addressed properly, and on the other, it can further fragment the social canvas and threaten civil coexistence. This begs the question of how much weight is the country willing to put onto the mission statement of history teaching. Should the purpose further include the achievement of reconciliation, there are some prerequisites experts have identified in order for that path to succeed. Wolfgang Höpken has developed five pre-conditions deemed necessary for history textbooks to serve as potential *agents of reconciliation*:

- the conflict needs to have ended;
- political elites must show absolute commitment to this field and refrain from interference;
- society needs to agree on the underlying principles by adopting a self-reflective attitude to the country's past;
- experts are to address whether school textbooks are the best medium to deal with past controversial events;
- and, society needs to accept the process in order not to disrupt social cohesion.⁴⁴

Looking into the Lebanese context, most conditions don't seem to be met to push history teaching to the next level of its potential objectives to effectively deal with the past and foster social cohesion.

That said, despite these formidable challenges, teaching history in societies emerging from conflict such as Lebanon holds immense promise. When taught responsibly and inclusively, history can be a catalyst for positive change, which constitutes a fundamental step towards what experts call *'historical consciousness'*⁴⁵, and thus shifting from historical processes mostly presented through the prism of a normative national history.

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Quoted by McCully A., Hartop B., Barton K. C. (2003). *Teaching History in Societies Emerging from Conflict: Report of an International Seminar*, UNESCO, p. 13.

45

Cf. Alayan, S. et al (2012). *The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula*, Berghahn Books Incorporated.

VI Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

Fouad Boustany, former President of the Lebanese University, used to say that *'the history of education in Lebanon is Lebanon's history itself'*. Despite the deep difficulties and challenges, this issue has been kept alive in the realm of public interest and policymakers' table. This journey is a complex and demanding one, especially in contexts and societies emerging from conflict such as Lebanon. But it is a journey that holds the promise of a brighter and more harmonious future.

Many stakeholders believe in the transformative power of teaching history, wishing to offer additional guidance to educators, negotiate with policymakers, and generate a fruitful dynamic to help students embrace scientific approaches and build critical thinking. They have unanimously defended the relevance of such a project and saluted the long history of collaboration among the different actors.

Evidently, the fears pertaining to the narratives related to the course of past national developments seem to cast a deep shadow on the overall issue of history teaching. The need to address *'all sides'*, *'all narratives'*, *'all interpretations'* has been heavily mentioned by a major part of the consulted stakeholders. The heterogeneity of the Lebanese society and the attachment of large segments of the population to their interpretation of their own struggles and ideologies also impose a cautious approach when dealing with curriculum reform for history teaching, specifically because of the sacrifices endured, as the war shattered the lives of an entire population. As highlighted by Dr. Abdel Raouf Sinno, *'the politicizing of history creates formidable challenges, as the past breaks into the present, treating history like a dead entity that we mourn all the time'*.⁴⁶

During his time as minister of culture, Ghassan Salame wrote in An Nahar newspaper that *'We should not forget the war, but we should also not become its prisoners, nor should we impose it on the new generation. Today's youth have a right to forget and we have a right to remember. I am concerned that they will make the same mistakes because we have not studied all of the war's consequences. Perhaps we abandoned this more quickly than what was needed. We should find a balance between the right of remembrance and the duty of forgetfulness'*⁴⁷. By doing so, a society can learn from history to build a better future for itself and its children.

⁴⁶
Response collected on 11 October 2023.

⁴⁷
An Nahar, April 7, 2004.

Such balance can only come in the form of a political agreement among all political and sectarian formations under a power-sharing arrangement, which constitutes the main decision-making process in today's Lebanon. As the challenge of reaching a political compromise persists, which cannot be envisaged in the present institutional crisis, all stakeholders attached to 'dealing with the past' should continue lobbying the national authorities, in addition to each of the political parties, irrespective of emergency and crisis situations, in order to revive a new national committee on history teaching.

The FMF and partner CSOs should look at every opportunity to build momentum around such an issue, including:

- mobilizing around commemorative dates (building campaigns and events around 13 April and 22 November for instance to foster public opinion support in favor of history teaching reform);
- consolidating strong partnerships with institutional actors in order to build and sustain a favorable momentum over history teaching reform (most importantly with CERD and Teachers' Unions);
- preparing the tools and material that will serve in the next round of discussions when a new national committee for history teaching will be enacted; and,
- identifying a community of teachers to engage in new ways for students to enter the realm of Lebanese history which does not sum up strictly to the history of its religious communities and their political stakes. Families, Cities, Villages, Culture, Arts, Sports, can form as many angles as needed for students to appreciate 'historical consciousness' and a rapport to time that will let them envisage the past, the present and the future.

In terms of direct recommendations, the following can be suggested at this stage:

To all stakeholders

- Pursue close collaboration and mutual support with other stakeholders in engaging on the issue of history teaching;
- Implement modern international assessment methods that evaluate students' historical thinking skills, analytical abilities, and research capabilities;
- Invest in digital resources and technology infrastructure to enhance access to educational historic materials;

- Encourage and fund historical research, particularly research related to Lebanon's history, to enrich and strengthen the field;
- Support the preservation of historical sites, monuments, and museums to provide students with opportunities for experiential and hands-on learning;
- Support the preservation and compilation of national archives and repositories of historical documents;
- Collaborate with cultural institutions to develop educational programs that align with the history curriculum and teaching;
- Seek partnerships with international organizations, universities, and foundations that specialize in history education and can provide expertise, resources, and support;
- Engage with the public, parents, and community stakeholders, including political parties and their representatives, to emphasize the importance of history education in fostering national identity, critical thinking, and civic engagement;

To the Ministry of Education and Higher Education

- Develop a national strategy for history education based on the principles of the 2022 National Framework with its relevant action plan;
- Introduce a gender perspective to future history teaching initiatives;
- Promote the use of innovative teaching methods and technology to engage students effectively on the topic of Lebanese history;
- Facilitate and support ongoing training and professional development opportunities to public-school teachers in the area of history teaching to enhance their pedagogical skills and use of relevant educational material;
- Pursue a close collaboration with Academia and Civil Society Organizations engaged on the issue of history teaching to advocate and join forces on the outlined recommendations.

To the CERD

- Reflect and build on the CERD's past achievements in term of history teaching;
- Implement the principles and objectives related to history teaching in the 2022 National Framework;
- Pursue close collaboration with Academia and Civil Society Organizations engaged on the issue of history teaching;

To Academia & Civil Society Organizations

- Continue soliciting attention and interest of national authorities and political parties in order to achieve progress on the issue of history teaching;
- Continue efforts to gather and train motivated teachers to ensure dynamic methods of history teaching, while offering adequate incentives in return for their dedication;
- Foster public opinion interest through systematically promoting academic historical findings on social media and others means of mass communication;
- Rally public opinion support through awareness campaigns around the importance of history teaching;
- Rally civil society organizations' support in advocating for needed reform with concerned MPs and the MEHE.

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