Prologue: A Hiatus of History

'When the war ended in Lebanon, it was like it never happened', the mother of my adopted Lebanese family told me back in 1998 when I was first getting interested in stories like that. Hunched over the kitchen table, she would describe to me that spring of 1991, when they and thousands of other Lebanese families were rediscovering parts of the country from which they had been barred for more than a decade; how they would go on picnics to the Christian areas in the North and Kisrawan, and how they would almost feel like tourists in their own country. The moment the war was over, she explained, it suddenly felt unreal, as if it were a distant memory or part of a film. The war did not dictate all aspects of the way she and other people lived their lives, nor did it determine the process of living, perceiving and remembering history in the aftermath. At the same time, the war clearly provided the narrative framework for both the family story I was listening to and the larger national story since 1990 in postwar Lebanon.

The family's house, where I had rented a room, was situated a few metres from the former front line in the neighbourhood of Ras al-Nabʿ. Several times during the war, heavy shelling forced them to relocate further into West Beirut. No doubt they had lived through hellish times, like most Lebanese, but unlike so many others, they had not lost any close family members for which they counted themselves lucky, *alhamdulillah*. As they shared with me reel after reel from the film that was their past, I started to wonder about the nature of this war and its lingering memories. It seemed there were more than enough stories for any amount of books. One day a cousin of the family took me to the rooftop and pointed down to the street where he had watched snipers play a game of cat

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and mouse with wounded victims. Snipers and rooftops seemed to recur, as did other archetypical images from the war, like the victim, the shelter and the refuge: crutches on which people hung their webs of stories. How to make sense of them, I thought, without plotting easy narratives, without imposing linearity on the fundamental ambiguity that all humans have towards the past and without losing humility towards the endless amount of stories, heard and unheard, written and unwritten, seen and unseen, that surround this war?

Living in Beirut in the late 1990s could still feel like wandering in and out of a film set. Ruins and bullet holes were everywhere in the city and reconstruction seemed to be perpetually ongoing, with no end in sight. Walking the streets of Beirut, it often felt as if past, present and future were coming together in seamless transitions from war zone to building ground and future scope. The Lebanese, I observed, seemed perfectly comfortable crossing from zone to zone. For some time, their casual way of dealing with the recent past was infectious. Later, I began to suspect that they were not actually dealing with the past but merely coping with it. I started listening to their stories and became interested in what Lebanese intellectuals had written about the war. However, the novels, essays, articles and films I got my hands on did not always correspond well to the stories I was told. This was hardly surprising. The Lebanese, like most people, have reservations about what they want to share with a stranger, whether foreign or Lebanese. Embellishing the past in the light of present needs, after all, is a very human thing to do. But if what they told me was not always the whole story, where was the rest to be found: in books, in private conversations or in archives? That question set me on the path of investigating the topic of this book: how the fragmented elements of memories are shaped over time, how they influence the way a society views its past and how a political community negotiates what happened and what it meant.

From 1997 to 2005, I spent both long and short periods of time in Beirut, living among the Lebanese and observing their relation to the past.[1] As it happened, this period coincided with the emergence and slow but steady growth of interest in memory of the civil war. Throughout this time, I tried to remain alert to any attempt at sharing and debating memories from the civil war, be it in literature, film or other art forms, political discourse, television and newspapers, magazines, graffiti or intellectual

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[1] I stayed in Beirut in September 1997, October 1998–February 1999, April–May 2000, April–May 2001, October 2002–October 2003, October 2004 and April–May 2005.

debates and gatherings, some of which I attended. Much of my analysis is informed by conversations and interviews with Lebanese both outside Lebanon and in my daily life in Beirut, but the main body of primary sources consists of books, newspaper articles, films, television programs, graffiti and other public material with reference to the war. Although a survey of such material can never be all-encompassing, this study does describe what I believe are some of the most prolific examples of public memory in the postwar era, with particular emphasis on the period from 2000 to 2005. The result is an ethnography of social memory and a history of a central debate in the cultural and intellectual life of postwar Lebanon.[2]

When postwar Lebanon ended on 14 February 2005, it came like lightning from a clear sky. A huge flash followed by a boom that ricocheted in the hills beyond Beirut and, in the minds of the Lebanese, a flashback to the war. Among charred corpses in the smouldering wreck of Rafiq al-Hariri's motorcade lay the remains of an entente between Syria and most of Lebanon's political class, which, weakened by its own contradictions, had succumbed with a crash. The date 14 February 2005 marked the end of an era of relative stability and enforced consensus that had characterised political life since 1990. Again, many Lebanese seemed to experience a hiatus of history like the one that gripped my adopted mother in November 1990, as if a whole historical period had not happened and Lebanon had entered a time machine, in the words of one commentator, 'not quite sure whether it was going twenty years forward in time or twenty years back' (Corm 2005). During the following months, mass agitation, bombs and dramatic political transformations transported people 'back to the war, with sights and sounds familiar but forgotten'.[3] This collective emotional déjà vu triggered the first widely national debate about the war and its lingering memories.

The end of postwar Lebanon in 2005 confirmed the rule that the history of modern Lebanon seems to fall in periods of around fifteen years. The years 1943, 1958, 1975, 1990 and 2005 each mark political upheavals of

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[2] I see these two objectives as part of the same research agenda. As Kansteiner (2002: 182) has noted, 'The majority of contributions to the field of memory studies continues research agendas that used to sail under separate colours. [That continuation] is particularly pronounced in areas of research that have traditionally been called "cultural-intellectual history"'.

[3] Interview with a Lebanese girl who was nine years old when the war ended. '30 sana 'ala bidayat al-harb (20/20)' (30 years after the beginning of the war), *al-Balad*, 4 May 2005.

epochal importance: independence, short civil war, long civil war, peace and the end of Syrian hegemony. Looking back at postwar Lebanon, the defining elements of social, political and economic life in this period were all related to the war in one way or another.[4] As the word *postwar* suggests, the basic condition of living in the aftermath of war loomed large over Lebanon in the fifteen years from 1990 to 2005. The killing of Hariri, the departure of Syrian troops and the new political (dis)order these events introduced during the so-called Independence Intifada in 2005 marked a turning point and a new point of reference in the Lebanese historical imaginary. It threw everything up in the air, including established ideas and taboos about the civil war.

The proliferation of memory in 2005 was not just a result of Syrian withdrawal and new freedoms of expression. Stories and interpretations of the war that entered the public realm in 2005 had been slowly moulded over a period of fifteen years by the complex forces of public culture. From the onset in 1990, Lebanese officialdom discouraged critical memorial-isation and instead promoted a culture of letting bygones be bygones. In the absence of state-sponsored attempts to establish what happened in the Lebanese Civil War and who was to blame for the human tragedies that accompanied it, the politics of remembering in postwar Lebanon emerged mainly through cultural production, by which various nonstate actors disputed the ethical, political and historical meaning of the civil war. At once a culmination of and a departure from this process of memorialisation, the events of the Independence Intifada marked the end of postwar Lebanon and of the period under consideration here.

[4] As an overview of the entries in the relatively few volumes on postwar Lebanon reveals, the defining issues in the politics, economy and culture of Lebanon's Second Republic have been Syrian hegemony, Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, reconstruction, stalled political reforms, cultural globalisation and reconciliation (Dagher 2000; Kassir 2000; Ellis 2002; Khalaf 2002; 2003; Makdisi 2004).

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Remembering a War of Selves and Others

> History is the lie commonly agreed upon.
> – Voltaire

> There are lies of which the ear is more guilty than the mouth.
> – Amin Maalouf, *Leo the African*

Remembering, Representation, Postnationalism

A people must know its past in order not to repeat it, so a popular truism has it. To the individual members of a political community, however, the past more often than not is a foreign country where human beings navigate according to the whims of memory rather than to the laudable ideals of objective history. Moreover, despite the focus on nationalism in many studies of social memory, personal memories in the public realm are not exclusively couched in narratives of nations and peoples. And even when they are, they often sit uneasily with official representation. This dilemma between the need for collective frameworks for understanding history and the often-fragmented nature of social memory has a particular bearing on culture and politics in societies emerging from colonialism, repression or war. In Middle Eastern countries like Palestine and Israel, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria and Lebanon, political violence resulting in contested, multifaceted and politically salient memories has shaped and framed the modern experience of state – and nationhood. The war known as the Lebanese Civil War is a case in point. Interpretations of the series of conflicts that ravaged Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 vary dramatically in popular, official and academic renderings. Some argue

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that the war was not Lebanese because regional and international agendas determined its onset and course, others that it was based not on civil popular mobilisation but on exploitation by militias, and others still that it was not one war but a series of wars with different agendas.

This is a book about how these and other interpretations and myths about the protracted civil war in Lebanon have been negotiated in the postwar period through an interplay between personal, often-emotive recollection and public cultural forms mediating collective sectarian and national identity formations. To disentangle this negotiation is to map people's self-understanding, both as individuals and as members of a national community. The book therefore is a study of central debates in Lebanese intellectual and cultural life and a mapping of nationalism in postwar Lebanon. But it also goes beyond the notion of nationalism to address other aspects of the formation of historical memory. This is because I find that the focus on the nation often found in studies of memory does not reflect social imaginaries in Lebanon, nor perhaps in the rest of the Middle East.[1] Undoubtedly, the nation-state and its myths of community continue to be a pivot for public acts of commemoration, which is reflected in the prominent place it takes in this study. At the same time, many Arabs today are wary of worn nationalist tropes of self and community. Some (continue to) emphasise subnational identity over and above the national family. Others, prompted by migration, multiple citizenships and subjectivities, operate betwixt and between Arab, Islamic, national and Western identifications. Most important, historical events have provided ruptures in the postcolonial emancipatory modernising self-understanding of states and leaderships that, despite their failure to meet their promises, still exist and still promote the discursive framework of nationalism. Arab nation-states and their foundational

[1] The overriding concern with nationalism in memory studies on the Middle East is a reflection of the fact that the central story about memory in the region, the Palestine–Israel conflict, concerns two opposing nation-building projects rooted in memory that have produced a rich literature (Sayigh 1994; Swedenburg 1995; Slyomovics 1998; Khalili 2007; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). Many issues from this work, like trauma (of the Nakba and the Holocaust), nationalism (both Palestinian and Israeli) and transmission through generations and cultural production, invite comparison with memories of the Lebanese Civil War. Moreover, the two conflicts and the memories they have produced are tangled. However, unlike the Palestine–Israel conflict, the Lebanese Civil War was not a two-sided conflict but a multiple, changing civil war. Nor was it, like Algeria's civil war, a postcolonial war of liberation (McDougall 2006) or, like the Iran–Iraq War, an interstate war with battles and ensuing projects of large-scale state-sponsored memorialisation (Davis 2005; Varzi 2006). The relatively marginal role of the state in the case of Lebanon forces us to look beyond the realm of official discourse.

stories may still provide crucial points of reference for social identity, but these stories are continuously being challenged, undermined and retold as a result of geopolitical transformations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: globalisation, migration, conflict, Islamism. Lila Abu-Lughod (2005: 136), in her study of Egyptian television series, identifies a postnationalist challenge from capital flows and globalisation, and a 'prenational' challenge from Islamist identifications with a cross-national *umma* (Islamic nation). She concludes that Egypt's cultural elites in the 1990s and beyond have used their privileged position as shapers of public culture to shore up the national discursive formations seen to be under attack (Abu-Lughod 2005: 136). The vital question here becomes not just how nations are imagined but also how they are reimagined and sometimes unimagined, undone by competing narratives. I believe that social memory – particularly of violent events in the postcolonial period – is a crucial area (under the larger heading of public culture) for investigating this process. Lebanon makes a particularly useful case for studying the undoing or displacement of nationalism because of its fractured national body.[2] I am interested in the process of representation through which cultural productions expressing memory – memory cultures – are formed; how the life stories of ordinary people are consumed publicly and in the process shaped and altered by sensitivities and collective notions particular to the national imaginary; and how these notions themselves give shape to history as it unfolds.

The unfolding development of nationalism in the Middle East through popular or public memory is a relatively new concern.[3] Although scholars have examined the origins and development of nationalism in the Arab Middle East through sophisticated readings of social history (Khalidi et al. 1991; Gershoni and Jankowski 1997b), a similar approach to the

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[2] By this I do not mean to suggest that Lebanon presents a unique case of sceptical national memory in the Middle East. On the contrary, scepticism is a result of the widespread sense that the main tenets of postcolonial modernity have failed, which, as Diana Allan (2007: 277) writes in her study of Palestinian refugees in the Shatila Camp in Lebanon, should force us to 'move beyond the coercive harmony of a national identity rooted in past history to include emergent forms of subjectivity that increasingly privilege individual aspiration over collective, nationalist imperatives'.

[3] Studies of nationalism in the Arab Middle East can be divided between those that look at the material conditions for the rise of the nation-state as a social formation and that concentrate on how a national consciousness emerges (Gershoni and Jankowski 1997a: xi; Cole and Kandiyoti 2002: 189). Studies of national memory fall in the second category. Within this body of literature, there is a tendency to focus on the formative period at the expense of the postindependence era (Gershoni and Jankowski 1997a: xiv).

post–World War II period is often lacking.[4] Arab forms of nationalism were created through constructs of continuity with the Arab-Islamic and, more rarely, pre-Islamic past (Armbrust 1996: 28–9; Salamandra 2004: 17). These constructs must be understood against a backdrop of the rupture caused by colonialism and the advent of modernist paradigms that were imposed by Europeans but also actively embraced by some members of society. But more recent historical ruptures – wars, civil wars and state violence – must be made sense of, too. Despite nationalist imagination's predilection for immutable history, the negotiation of national memory continues to evolve in ways that incorporate recent events and give new meaning to old myths, and indeed undermine those myths. In the evolving histories of states, revolution, war and national liberation generate new foci for nationalist imagination. In particular, young, postcolonial states rely on the memory of recent events as unifying factors undergirding their political community. Studying memories of recent events like the Lebanese Civil War can give us insights into nationalism of evolving history from a variety of social perspectives outside the state. Despite its significance, state-centred nationalism only accounts for the production, not the reception and ensuing negotiation, of national memory. National memory as it is adapted, produced and reproduced in society is often informed by the disparities, catastrophes and traumas that cannot be captured by triumphant history and must, accordingly, be disseminated through less official channels, which I refer to here as memory cultures.

Memory Cultures and the Production of Historical Memory

I use the term 'memory cultures' to describe the production of historical memory, because it denotes a plurality that fits the Lebanese context better than, for example, the more commonly used, and more monolithic-sounding, 'collective memory'. Like other authors who have recently employed the term (Cornelissen, Klinkhammer and Schwentker 2003; Carrier 2005; Radstone 2005), I find memory cultures a good way to describe the variety of overlapping agendas, issues and interpretations in any national culture. On the one hand, postwar Lebanon saw the growth of a counterhegemonic memory culture of what I call memory makers, people of the creative class who became occupied with questions of how to memorialise the war through social and artistic activities, and produced books, testimonies, films, articles, graffiti and architecture

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[4] With important exceptions such as Longva 1997, Shryock 1997 and Dakhlia 2002.

through which the war was remembered. On the other hand, Lebanon's political groups produced a different type of memory culture based on hagiographic frameworks for understanding the past that were used to underpin and legitimise their political identity. Both encompassed a variety of expressions, political sympathies and approaches to remembering. And both forms of memory culture negated the Lebanese state's official approach to the war – that it was best forgotten – albeit with very different means and ambitions.

Memory cultures, whether political, intellectual or artistic, emanate from individual experiences that are socially constructed, imagined and represented, and are discernable to observers as social patterns, expressions and narratives. Reading memory as representation necessitates methodological attention to the production of memory in its social context and not purely its appropriation in high cultural forms such as elite cultural production and nationalist imagery and discourse. Without attention to different genres and modes of memory, their production and reception and their transformation over time, we miss the dual function of memory as representation and misrepresentation. Memory culture has a tendency to misrepresent the past by producing metaphors of, for example, psychological and neurological terminology like amnesia and trauma to describe social patterns of remembering (Kansteiner 2002: 180; White 2006: 329). Such facile deduction makes immediate sense because it is anchored in recognisable emotions and experience. At a closer look, idioms that project the autobiographical dimension onto the national body invariably simplify and misrepresent the social dynamics of historical memory. As observers, we must carefully avoid reproducing these idioms and instead understand their social production as a complex interaction that involves the persistence of cultural traditions as well as the ingenuity of memory makers and the subversive interests of memory consumers (Kansteiner 2002). By applying a critical and detailed analysis of the processes of representation, we may be able to capture the multiple and often-complex meanings of memory as individual and collective meaning making as well as idiom for political action.

Humans name and frame their individual and collective past in narrative form. Both uppercase History and the histories we call memory are essentially made up of stories about the past. As the stories my 'mother' told me in 1997 show, remembering for the individual not only is welcoming, receiving an image of the past, but also is 'searching for it, "doing" something' (Ricoeur 2004: 56). Just like she moved around with her family, chased by the horrors of the war, and eventually returned to their

spot in Ras al-Nabʿ, so the nation, in her narration, traversed dark times but returned to its prewar social relations 'like the war didn't happen'. As we will see, this cyclical story resonates with one of several master narratives about the war promoted in various ways through public culture. In the active attempt to fit personal experience into that of the social milieu and construct a sense of history (*faire histoire*), common sense and accepted narratives often conflict with the truthfulness of remembering (Halbwachs 1992; Ricoeur 2004: 57), particularly when political and other social identities are in play. Smaller stories of ordinary people's lives and ruptures through the war and the postwar periods gradually interweave with mnemonic benchmarks in the physical and discursive fabric of the nation, resulting in socially constructed narratives about the past. As history continues to unfold, new structures emerge, guiding what is memorable, how to commemorate it and what kind of story in which to place it. To write a history of remembering, therefore, is to map shifting contours of overlapping and contradicting narratives in the national realm. It is to observe mnemonic manipulation – invented traumas and idioms for political mobilisation – as well as memories of individual life stories. It is to listen to a wealth of stories about death and survival, hate and compassion, drama and ennui. These stories may not be prompted by nor result in either truth or lies. For the purpose of this study, the more crucial process is how people render their memories meaningful in the context of master narratives – what social psychologists call schemata or scripts – by employing various conscious and unconscious strategies of remembering (Sivan and Winter 1999: 13). Indeed, the fact that testimonies and other expressions of memory culture are social strategies makes accurate renderings beside the point.

Therefore, the aim of a history of remembering is not to clarify what actually happened during the war (in itself a very valuable and timely exercise) but to identify why certain frameworks for understanding the past have been accentuated over others. As Maurice Halbwachs (1992) famously stated, the way in which people remember actually tells us more about the present (the postwar period) than about the past (the war). This is not to suggest, like Pierre Nora (1989), a strict separation between emotive, subjective memory and rational, objective history. Such a distinction ignores the overlaps between the two categories (Khalili 2007: 4). By attempting to organise past time and space, the historian inevitably stresses certain conceptions and blots out others (McDougall 2006: 5). Historians of the Lebanese Civil War fish in a dark sea of possible