

Writing of new history textbook sparks political dispute in Lebanon

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Lebanese history textbooks have not been updated for decades.

[Nohad Topalian/Al-Shorfa]

Schoolgirls Joel Samaha and Rosetta Zoghby, both 14, have very different views about the ongoing debate in Lebanon regarding the content of history textbooks.

"I do not find any practical use for studying details of Lebanon's history. Why insist on including long sections on past events?" Joel asked Al-Shorfa.

Rosetta, however, said she saw the need to learn about the past.

"We need to know the details of Lebanon's history in order to know how to deal in the future with events that repeat themselves," she said.

The two girls' differing opinions reflect the divisiveness of the broader political controversy between the March 8 and March 14 camps over the framework in which the country's history book is being written.

The framework is currently being developed by a committee of historians representing both political camps under the supervision of the Educational Centre for Research and Development.

Lebanon, which has been trying since 2002 to introduce a unified history textbook, faces attempts by each camp to omit the history of the other, as was the case when demands were made to the ministerial committee formed to study the project. They included demands to omit any mention of the Cedar Revolution, the Lebanese resistance and its martyrs, and the post-March 14 period in favour of mentioning only the names of Hezbollah's martyrs.

The modifications elicited denouncements from the Future Movement and the education bureau of the Lebanese Forces Party. In a statement, both said they viewed the move as "a political and factional decision imposed through hegemony and domination in the aftermath of the coup against the [previous] government to develop a truncated history textbook that reflects the views of one Lebanese group, distorting certain historical facts and omitting others in favour of the coalition of forces that dominate government".

The protests culminated March 10th when student supporters of the Kataeb and Ahrar parties demonstrated under the slogan, "If you want to overcome a people, make them forget their history".

Prior to the demonstrations, Kataeb party co-ordinator, parliamentarian Sami al-Gemayel, warned that people can stage "educational disobedience in the event the draft history textbook is approved by the cabinet".

The demonstrations ended with clashes between students and security officers, leaving 14 wounded, including four members of the security forces. A message from the demonstrators was delivered to Prime Minister Najib Mikati, demanding a "review of the draft textbook and the development of a new unified textbook through an impartial procedure that presents all points of view on controversial subjects in order to produce a textbook that respects history."

Textbook delayed

On Tuesday (March 14th), following his meeting with al-Gemayel, Mikati said, "The history book issue is on hold until it acquires the endorsement of the majority of Lebanese".

"The time has come to approach the issue of co-existence among Lebanese in a different way, and to build Lebanon on the basis of recognising the specificity of each group because we live in a diverse country that is free and democratic," al-Gemayel said during a press conference on March 3rd. "The struggle of a large segment of the Lebanese population and its martyrs who fell in defence of Lebanon cannot be ignored."

Dr. Essam Khalifa, a member of the history educators committee, said the debate revolves around the post-1975 segment of Lebanon's history and subsequent events.

He told Al-Shorfa, "Some are of the opinion that all details of the Lebanese war and subsequent events should be included, while others believe it would suffice to review the internal, regional and international causes of the war along with the cost in human life and the economic, tourism-related, commercial, and agricultural losses and the collapse of the Lebanese currency."

Khalifa said he believes limiting the content to synopses and brief summaries would help students derive lessons from the war and seek to preserve national unity, the

national charter, and Lebanon's independence, as well as develop respect for the diversity of Lebanese society, public freedoms, social justice, and balanced development.

"Getting into the details requires a cooling of the political climate. We cannot include everything because the parties that participated in the war are now political players and a tense relationship exists between them. Neither do we want compromises [to be made] over [the content of] the textbook at the expense of the truth," he said.

Dispute about contemporary history

Dr. Abdel Raouf Sinno, former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the Lebanese University, told Al-Shorfa the dispute revolves around the contemporary history of Lebanon, specifically Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war and the period after February 14, 2005 -- the date of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

"While the other side wants to omit certain events, we are insisting on including them because they are part of history. The Lebanese resistance against the Syrian presence is considered [merely] a confrontation by the other side, while we insist on including it," he said.

"The same applies to the [Cedar Revolution], which was kindled by a million and a half Lebanese citizens, and the martyrs of the war in Lebanon [1975-1990], both of which the other camp wants to omit and skip over to include only the July 2006 war," he added.

Sinno said a textbook cannot be produced through barter and compromises, and what is currently taking place only serves to heighten political tension. The aim of the history textbook is to relate all events with honesty, not to have every party or sect teach only its version of history, he said.

"We are trying to develop a national textbook for all, taking into account all components of Lebanese society," Sinno said. "The March 8 camp, on the other hand, wants to infuse history with ideology. Bashir al-Gemayel, for example, is a martyr to his sect, whereas they bestow the honour of martyrdom only on those who die facing the enemy."

Andre Nassar, professor of history at the Faculty of Arts at the Lebanese University, said the loss of trust between Lebanese and sectarianism were manifest in the writing of the textbook.

"The events should be presented in context and chronologically without misrepresenting their underlying facts or truths, yet without going into their causes because that is the root of the problem in developing the curriculum," he said.

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