LEBANON 1920 – 2020
HOW MIGHT WE COMMEMORATE THIS CENTENNIAL?
A Developing Essay Exhibition by UMAM D&R

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These hundreds years

Overshadowed by the daily political squabbles that have resulted in Lebanon's underdeveloped street-level sectarian violence, another contentious debate has arisen over the issue of Lebanon's borders. Unfortunately, this debate is not as visible as it should be. The issue is so sensitive that some contemporaries have, especially those from the older generation, been reluctant to discuss it. Yet, this debate is no less important than those that were more visible in the past. The consequences of Lebanon's borders are, in fact, more serious than the political turmoil in the country. In reality, the somewhat younger debate is not only at the epicenter of all other debates, but it also provides a somewhat contradictory context for the development of the country as a whole.

As Lebanon's borders remain a contentious issue, the central debate over the State's creation also continues to shift according to the impulses of the parties involved. In its most essential form, this debate is manifested by contradictory calls for commemoration or total disregard for that anniversary. According to the pro-commemoration faction, Lebanon's State Institution represents a unique milestone in history, while those opposed consider September 11, 1990, as a particular harmful event that they celebrate. These celebrations could undermine the country's fragile stability. Interestingly, this debate reached the Lebanese Parliament in 2017, where characteristics similar to those noted above were used by both pro- and anti-commemoration advocates.

While tracing the circuitous routes being taken by this debate is indeed an interesting endeavor (particularly when assessing its applicability and relevance to the sectarian and social fault lines that today divide the Lebanese), the issue can be equated to identifying and analyzing a single tree in a Lebanese forest that has grown increasingly dense over the course of the last 100 years. And while this metaphor may seem modern, consider James Lovelock's observation about human intervention in ecological systems. "Surely, it's much easier to create a desert than a forest." In other words, one of the best ways to view the product of Lebanon's hundred years of existence is by considering it somewhat of a complex human environment, replete with good and bad times, attractive and repugnant characteristics, and events—and memories—that trigger both nostalgia and outright disgust.

As part of its mission, UMAM D&R is committed to investigating all efforts necessary to document this pivotal, ongoing debate and to assess any attempts to discover about their ability to explain Lebanon's current situation. At the same time, however, the output from this documentation initiative will appear generally senseless if viewed apart from the progress of this Lebanese human experience—however fruitless and wayward it may seem. Based on this perception of Lebanon's first 100 years, UMAM D&R conceived the idea of an essay exhibition entitled "Lebanon 1900-2000: How Might We Commemorate This Centennial?" Hopefully, this provocative title will convey effectively at least one of the messages implicit in this work: that the efficacy of commemorating this upcoming centenary remains, at best, indeterminate....

Regardless of the path ultimately taken by this initiative, UMAM D&R acknowledges that its efforts will not produce an exhaustive record of this "century of Lebanon." And where acknowledgment is concerned, UMAM D&R will find it impossible to recognize adequately the countless contributions made in behalf of this experiment—good or bad—by the Lebanese and non-Lebanese who have been participants. Nevertheless, UMAM D&R remains confident that this ongoing activity affords glimpses into that hundred-year period which suggest associations and connections between artifacts, historical events and ideas, most of which do not appear to have a common denominator. Further, because UMAM D&R has placed high on its agenda the efforts it makes to detune the interplay between "Lebanese" and "Others," it should not be surprising that this project alludes to the "war" in its larger sense, including its diverse expressions and locations.

As noted above, this developing essay exhibition will never be either sufficiently exhaustive or entirely complete. After all, as with any bona fide "human experiment," the hundred years of Lebanon is essentially an endless tale. Its infinite nature can be explained either by the fact that the experiment remains open-ended, or that it represents little more than yet another attempt to impart reality into an otherwise virtual life. Another question as hard to fathom as the commemoration itself...