

# Forum poignantly unites past, present

Inaugural platform framed around question 'Lebanon, more of the same?'

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**B**EIRUT: When the Forum for Memory and Future held its inaugural event at Beit Beirut Thursday last week, the organizers framed it as a question – “Lebanon, more of the same?” Later that evening, many Lebanese answered with, “Revolution.”

In retrospect, the timing of the talk, held on the eve of Lebanon’s current wave of mass street protests, may seem comic, but the topics discussed remain poignant. Many protesters have voiced anger over how, almost 30 years since the end of the Civil War, the country is blighted by economic, political and social stagnation.

Moderated by LBCI journalist Dima Sadek, the talk gathered writer and researcher Ahmad Baydoun and artist Nada Sehnaoui to discuss ways of reconciling the past with the present, in order to strive for a better future.

Decades after the Lebanese Republic was founded, Lebanese Association for History President Nayla Khodr Hamadeh remarked ahead of the discussion, debates around it remain numerous.

“The forum is an open platform for all of us to seek together the path to deal with the past and the violent conflicts and the memories that it produced,” she said. “The past is here. We live it every day and the evidence of this is many.

“Some of these are encouraging



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signs, such as the approval of the 2018 law on missing and forcibly disappeared persons, which we hope will soon [have a] governing body,” she continued. “But there are many frustrating and confusing signs, such as the failure to address the issue of teaching the history of modern Lebanon in schools.”

Sadek, who said that she herself was too young to have experienced the Civil War, recalled the confusion she felt about her classmates’ identifying with a war they never lived.

“We’re living a cold war in Lebanon, which is not due to the events of the present, despite our present holding all possible explosive issues, from economical to social to political problems,” Sadek told the crowded auditorium. “All the explo-

sive topics that happen on social media, instead happen when someone mentions Bachir Gemayel for example, if someone posts a photo of Sabra and Shatila or someone mentions the 1976 Damour massacre.

“It’s all topics related to history and these 20-year-olds are killing each other on social media, despite not being there,” she said.

“Everyone inheriting these memories from their parents, these stories are in them, because there was never any real research about the trauma they experienced.”

Baydoun’s contribution was largely rooted in the ideas of French historian and philosopher Marcel Gauchet, who has explored how history is written and how that can affect the future.

“When we think about the past and use the term history,” Baydoun said, “it takes the lead in establishing our link between the present and the future. Tomorrow should become the element in our attempts to change our present. This is how we should look at our aspirations of the present.

“We can go back to the words of Gauchet and see what he said about heritage and how people transform the legacy of the past into a history that is utilized for the present,” he added. “Presentism defines that past and keeps it where it is ... and stands in the way of us trying to relive the past. Gauchet likens this autonomy, taking care of their affairs with their own hands, away from seeing their existence as being in the hands of others.”

Sehnaoui brought a less scholarly perspective to the discussion, suggesting a method for accepting the past, conversing through it and emerging with a healthier relationship to history. She went on to discuss several of her art projects that over the years have sought to generate conversation about the Civil War and illuminate Lebanon’s collective amnesia concerning that conflict.

“At the time everyone said, ‘Let’s not open old wounds and let bygones be bygones,’” Sehnaoui said. “The question is, how can wounds heal if they’ve never been cleaned? It was difficult to abide by that order of public silence and [pretend] that by some magical power nothing had ever happened.

“In 1990, the international media published a small statement showing the statistics of the Civil War,” she added. “Fifteen years of our lives were summarized in this small list. I had to create an art series to reflect this and painted the words into the canvas.

“In 1999 I painted on the front page of l’Orient-le Jour every single day for a year,” she recalled. “I also went back into their archives and searched for April 13, 1975, but only found April 14. I painted that statistical summary over it and placed piles and piles, 20 tons, of the papers as an installation in Martyrs’ Square.

“I asked people to think about their memories of daily life in central Beirut from before the war,” she said. “We received hundreds of responses and built 300 piles of newspapers with their memories written on them.”

The Forum for Memory and Future will hold further talks and events from November onward, the topics of which will be announced later. Interested parties are invited to join the forum.

Photo courtesy of Karen Keirouz