

أَفْكُسُارٌ واقتراحَاتٌ على المُجَرَّب معرض بتوقيع أمم للتوثيق والأبحاث

الهنغار، أيلول ٢٠١٨

LEBANON 1920 - 2020

## HOW MIGHT WE COMMEMORATE THIS CENTENNIAL?

A Developing Essay Exhibition by UMAM D&R

THE HANGAR, September 2018





Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft Confédération suisse Confederazione Svizzera Confederaziun svizra

**Embassy of Switzerland in Lebanon** 



## These hundred years

Overshadowed by the daily political sparring that often threatens to push Lebanon again toward street-level sectarian violence is another contentious debate. Unsurprisingly, that tense exchange has remained far less boisterous than its more visible contemporaries have, especially since those purport themselves to be much more urgent. Yet, this "lesser" debate is every bit as central and important to the country as the issues that dominate the headlines in its newspapers or appear suddenly on its television stations as breaking news stories. In reality, this somewhat younger debate is not only at also provides a somewhat clandestine source of fuel for many of them. This bitter controversy centers on Lebanon's September 1, 1920 institution as an independent political and judicial entity!

Briefly, the act responsible for having established the State of Greater Lebanon-the direct forebear of the Lebanese Republic, which emerged in 1926—was accomplished in a rather administrative manner by a representative of the French military. France, among the victors of World War I, was given a "mandate" to administer the territories of the defunct Ottoman Empire from which "Lebanon" was culled. Among the many other French decisions related to the political organization of the territories entrusted to France, this one prompted a series of calculable side effects, including the broad chasm that separated those who believed that this French action indeed fulfilled their "aspirations" for autonomy, and others who were convinced that it crushed their desire for unity with their neighbors.

Throughout the (nearly) 100 years of Lebanon's existence, proponents of its institution as a State have never ceased their efforts to rationalize and applaud the original French action. A favorite argument in behalf of the action holds that France was simply correcting a historical "mistake" when it restored Lebanon. Yet, contrasting arguments exist as well. While there is no argument that Lebanon (or some form of it) existed in antiquity, opponents

of the French initiative admonish the artificial nature of that development, which they believe was taken to advance "evil" plans to divide the "Arab nation" and thereby cement its rule according to the whims of a colonial power.

As Lebanon's centennial steadily approaches, the central debate over the State's creation also continues to shift according to the impulses of the parties involved. In its most elemental form, that debate is manifested by contradictory calls for commemoration of, or total disregard for that anniversary. According to the pro-commemoration ebanon's institution represents a ni point in its history, while those opposed consider September 1, 1920 particularly shameful and fear that themed celebrations could undermine the country's fragile stability. Interestingly, this debate reached the Lebanese parliament in 2017, where characterizations similar to those noted above were used by both pro- and anticommemoration 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 random, consider James Lovelock's observation about human intervention in ecological systems, "Sadly, it's much easier to create a desert than a forest," By extension, one of the best ways to view the product of Lebanon's hundred years of existence is by considering it something of a complex human experiment, replete with good and bad times, attractive and repulsive characteristics, and events-and memories-that trigger both nostalgia and outright disgust.

As part of its mission, UMAM D&R is committed to investing all efforts necessary to document this pivotal, ongoing debate and to assess any hints it may 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 progression of this Lebanese human experience—however frivolous 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 titled "Lebanon 1920 - 2020: How Might We Commemorate This Centennial?" Hopefully, this interrogative title will convey effectively at least one of the messages implicit in this work; that the efficacy of commemorating this upcoming centennial remains, at best, indeterminate....

Regardless of the path ultimately taken via 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 badby 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 share a common denominator. Further, because UMAM D&R has placed high on its agenda the efforts it makes to debunk the interplay between Lebanese "war" and "peace," it should not be surprising that this project alludes to the "war" in its larger sense, including its diverse expressions

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...