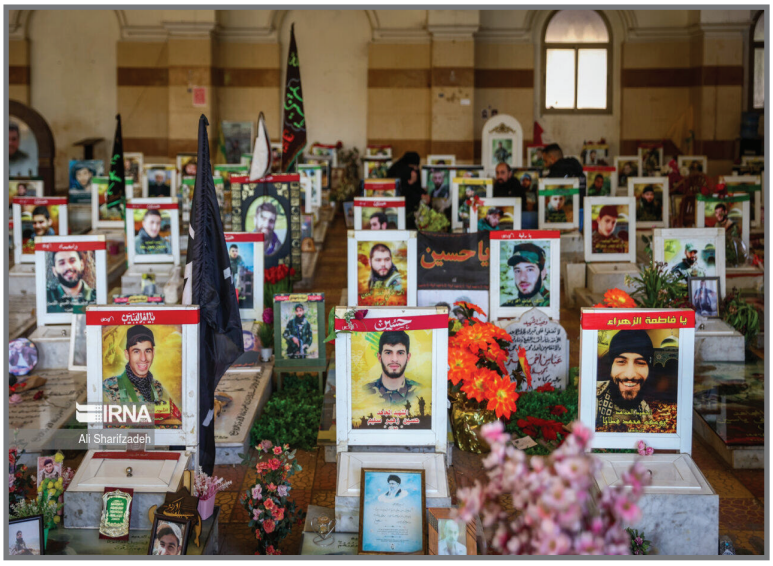
The Stories We Inherit: War, Memory, and Lebanon's Fractured Present

Joelle Abou Nader

Growing up in the shadow of Lebanon's civil war, I belong to a generation that never lived through the conflict firsthand but has inherited its deep scars and competing narratives. For many of us, the recent Hezbollah-Israel conflict reopened old wounds, raised urgent questions about the future of a country still divided by history and identity, and brought new perspectives that challenge long-held beliefs and offer possibilities for change. This struggle over narratives is not only political; it is profoundly personal, shaping how we see ourselves, our communities, and the fragile prospect of peace. Much like during the 1990–1975 civil war, Lebanese communities remain sharply divided along sectarian lines. This piece explores how these narratives are shaped, and whether storytelling might help bridge Lebanon's growing divides.

After the recent conflict, two primary youth perspectives have emerged, each deeply influenced by the legacy of the Lebanese Civil War—a -15year conflict marked by sectarian violence, foreign interventions, and deep national fragmentation—and by the stories passed down through generations. The memories are more than history; they live on in families and communities today, shaping how young people see themselves and their place in the country. Some youth, inspired by stories of resistance, believe Hezbollah's fight against Israel is a necessary continuation of that struggle. Others, worn down by decades of violence, see only pain and destruction, hoping for an end to war altogether. For me, these competing narratives are not distant; instead they are the threads that weave

through everyday life, influencing who we trust, who we fear, and whether we can imagine a peaceful future.



In the southern suburbs of Beirut, young activists—primarily women aged 16 to 30—have turned the destruction from Israeli airstrikes into political expression. They use graffiti to paint images of the late Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah on the walls of Dahieh. For many of these young women, this is not just art—it is a way to reclaim their sense of belonging and hope amid chaos, a powerful assertion that their community's voice will not be erased despite the devastation.

Further north, Lebanese University students rallied in solidarity with Gaza, condemning Israeli aggression and calling for national unity. In addition, Hezbollah›s student councils orchestrated a solidarity rally at the Hadath University Complex, where students voiced their support for Palestine and condemned Israeli actions. Witnessing these protests and others, it is clear how Hezbollah continues to hold a symbolic place as a bulwark against foreign interference and a source of pride for many. The students' chants and signs reminded me of how deeply the narratives of resistance are ingrained in Lebanon's youth, passed down from older generations who lived through war and occupation.

For me—and for many others who grew up hearing the stories of Lebanon's civil war—the desire to avoid another war is not just political. It is deeply emotional, a plea rooted in the trauma passed down through our families and the constant fear of repeating the past. With the country already buckling under economic hardship and political uncertainty, the thought of yet another conflict feels not just overwhelming—it feels unbearable.

This can be seen in other areas of Beirut, where anti-war posters bearing messages like «Enough, we are tired, Lebanon doesn›t want war,» have proliferated. These signs signal a growing youth dissent against Hezbollah's military role. Even within the Shi'a community, traditionally Hezbollah's support base, unease is rising as destruction and displacement mount. This division reminded me how deeply the civil war's legacy still splits us, with young people caught between inherited narratives and the harsh realities unfolding around them.

I have seen stories—shared online, whispered in interviews, sometimes hidden behind animation or pseudonyms—by Lebanese and Syrian civilians who clearly reject the war. One civilian said: "This hostility and war have cost us dearly". These are not just political statements—they are lived experiences, quietly challenging the idea of conflict. As more of these stories surface and gain attention, I cannot help but feel the tension rising. These stories do not just expose hidden realities—they highlight how fractured our understanding of conflict has become.

In one part of Beirut, the Rawdat al-Shahidayn cemetery in the southern suburbs holds around a hundred graves of young Hezbollah fighters, many of whom died in battles with Israel or in Syria alongside Assad's forces. Their gravestones are marked with yellow ribbons declaring them "Martyrs on the road to Jerusalem." Families, especially grieving mothers, regularly visit the site to mourn and honor them. One such mother lost her son, a -30year-old father of two, in an Israeli strike on Ayta ash Shab. She sees her son's death not with regret, but as a noble sacrifice for land and faith.

In a separate moment, a medical professional visited a government shelter where she attempted to console a grieving widow. To her surprise, the widow responded, "Do not console me—congratulate me." She expressed pride in her husband's death as a martyr. The response surprised the visitor and underscored the differing perspectives on loss and sacrifice. These personal encounters highlight the deep divisions between religious and political perspectives, showing that even in grief, Lebanon's communities are separated by deeply rooted beliefs about sacrifice and identity. This contrast illustrates how one family's hero can be another's source of pain or division,

revealing how differing narratives shape perceptions of one another and often contribute to ongoing separation rather than unity.

These competing narratives do not just shape how I understand the present—they also influence how I see the future. If these stories remain rigid and opposed, we risk repeating the cycle of conflict that has shaped my country's past. But if we learn to listen across divides and recognize both pain and hope, there is a chance for a different future—one where these stories bring us closer instead of driving us apart.