War and Its Conflicting Narratives: Do We Need a Single Story?

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On April 13, as we happened to sit together in a circle during a short break in one of our university classes, a classmate suddenly asked "When did the Lebanese Civil War end?" Some hesitated. Others answered "1990." But one colleague smiled and said "That's if it really ended!" We laughed.

Then he asked "And who fought whom?" The laughter stopped. Each of us began telling a different version. Some said the Lebanese fought each other. Others rejected that angrily "No, it wasn't the Lebanese—it was groups brought here to fight on our soil!" Still others insisted it was foreign interference that turned Lebanon from a country of prosperity into a battlefield it never needed to be.

Each one of us held a personal "truth" about the war. As if each one of us had lived in a different time, memorized a different story. A simple question suddenly exposed an unhealed wound, a fractured memory, and a nation living in more than one narrative. That question revealed that every group has its own version of the war—and that we are far from any shared truth.

What was most striking in that moment was not only the contradictions between the stories, but the absolute certainty with which each was told. Every voice carried conviction, as though their version were a sacred text, unquestionable. It became clear that the war was not only fought on the ground—it was also fought in the realm of narrative.

How Are Narratives Built?

We are not born with a ready-made story. We hear it, absorb it, repeat it, circulate it, mimic it in our own way, adjust it, and hide behind it. Each emerges within a particular frame.

In Lebanon, people build their narratives about the war from their own sources:

a grandfather who “fought to defend his village,” parents who recount events through their own perspective, a neighbor who was displaced from her home, a political party that commemorates “resistance” or “steadfastness,” a writer who offers his viewpoint in a book, or even the silence of the school curriculum, skipping over the war as though it were a contagious disease, or a shameful crime unfit to be discussed.

The absence of a unified history textbook does not only mean students graduate without knowing what happened. It means they graduate each knowing something different about the very same event. Narratives form when the same story is told again and again, in familiar voices, within an environment that resembles us. The problem is that these stories do not meet, do not dialogue, do not acknowledge one another. The result: a fragmented collective memory, each side convinced that its narrative is the real one.

In most countries, even where narratives about past events differ, there exists at least one official reference—a standard history taught in schools and returned to when needed. In Lebanon, the vacuum left every group free to write its own history, built on fear and selective memory.

Narratives are not created in a void. They are reinforced through daily discourse: a song, a painting, a street named after a battle, or a memorial to an “unknown martyr” at a street corner. Each of these elements engraves a particular image of the past into collective consciousness.

What Does the Absence of a Shared Narrative Mean?

In a country that emerged from a long war, multiple narratives are expected. But when those narratives become walls separating people, diversity turns into division.

The absence of a shared narrative in Lebanon is not just a historical issue. It is an identity crisis. It is a crisis of belonging: if we cannot agree on what happened, how can we agree on what we want for our future, or how to achieve it?

Perhaps what we need is not a single, rigid narrative, but rather a space where multiple stories can meet, confront one another, and engage with empathy—not clash again. Acknowledging multiplicity does not mean surrendering to division; it could instead be the first step toward justice. When each of us tells our story, and listens to the other’s, some healing begins. Not because we agreed, but because we respected difference without

denial or superiority.

Maybe the unifying narrative we seek is, in truth, a narrative of honesty: accepting that the war was not a single story, but dozens of stories—contradictory, painful, yet all real.

How many times have we entered into debates with friends or relatives about "who started the war, and why," or "who was right"—only for the conversation to end in tension or heavy silence? This is not simply a disagreement in opinion; it is a deeper conflict over the very foundations of memory.

The absence of a common narrative also means the absence of a common sense of justice. Those who feel they were victims do not see themselves reflected in the other's story. Worse, they may feel their suffering is denied or belittled whenever an opposing version is presented. The result: a constant sense of betrayal, a feeling that no one truly understands the other. It is as if the war never ended, but merely shifted—from the streets into memory.

We see this division everywhere: in politics, in media, even in art. Memorials or "victory" celebrations often take place on the same

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dates, yet with entirely different language and symbols. Massacres are recounted heroically on one side, and as shameful stains on the other. It is no wonder reconciliation in Lebanon has never truly taken place—how can we reconcile with a past whose story we cannot agree upon?

This absence of narrative even shapes our daily lives: when some avoid discussing the past out of fear of reopening old wounds, while others weaponize it to fuel new rhetoric. We remain trapped between silence and undeclared conflict.

Do We Need a Single Narrative?

It is not a simple question.

Some argue that a unified narrative is essential for building one nation. Just as the body needs one heart, a state needs a shared memory—a story that includes everyone, excludes no one, recognizes all victims, and condemns all crimes, without justification.

But in a fractured reality like Lebanon's, is this possible? Or would trying to impose one narrative merely silence other voices? Would it risk reproducing injustice in the name of unity?

Perhaps what we need is not a "single" narrative in the narrow sense, but rather a space for many narratives to face each other, to converse, and to humanize each other. Not to fight again.

Perhaps what we need is the whole, unvarnished truth.

How the younger generation engages with the war could either deepen today's divisions or help overcome them. What we need as youth is not only to understand what happened, but also to draw lessons from it, and to pass them on to the next generation. Fifty years after the war began, it has become necessary to finally close that book with a collective story told in one voice for all generations.

From Narrative to Future

Without a unifying story, the past becomes a burden rather than a source of understanding. Some remain silent out of fear of old wounds, while others exploit it to manufacture new enemies.

At the end of that short classroom debate, we found no single answer. But we were left with questions.

We asked ourselves: Was what we heard at home enough to understand what really happened? Was the whole story told—or only the version that fit the environment we grew up in?

The absence of a shared narrative is not just narrative chaos—it is a sign of pain still unprocessed. Perhaps reconciliation begins not with repeating one story, but with listening to them all. Perhaps nations are built not on forgetting, but on remembering—on writing, listening, and exchanging the small stories we tell one another.

That may be the path toward a country that does not beautify its past, nor run away from it, but recognizes it in all its complexity.