

How to prevent civil war: Remember the last one

LAU political scientist says history has a tendency to repeat itself

There is a "very simple" reason why it is necessary for the Lebanese to remember the civil war and talk about it, and that is to avoid another one, said Fawwaz Traboulsi, a professor of political science at the Lebanese American University.

Traboulsi argues that historical events have a tendency to repeat themselves because their causes also tend to do so.

Accordingly, to put an end to strife, it is important to disrupt history at some point in a country that has a record rich of civil wars.

Speaking during an interview with The Daily Star, Traboulsi said two phenomena follow a civil war which could explain why people don't talk much about it.

The first phenomenon is that after a war, people have a common tendency to say they don't want to remember, they want to live their lives and they have had enough. The second phenomenon is an organized, official amnesia, which is far less innocent than the first.

There is real interest in forced amnesia, which according to Traboulsi is the result of a tacit understanding among officials.

"Those who caused the war are in leadership positions now and remembering the war could mean questioning them about their role in it," he said.

Another reason, he said, is that discussions about the war could raise serious questions concerning why the war had occurred in the first place.

"If the situation in Lebanon was really so great, why then did the war take place?" he asked. "If this was really the war of others, why have 120,000 Lebanese killed each other? There must be a serious reason why Lebanese die for others.

"Constructed amnesia is im-

portant to suppress any memory of the war and to suppress any causality of the war," Traboulsi said.

Traboulsi said there was a possibility that by reviving memories of the war, one might be reviving feelings of hatred among the Lebanese.

"That of course is a very valid argument and I personally believe there should be a selective memory," he said.

"A war has reasons, a history, and lessons are drawn from it and memory has to deal with those three elements.

"There are many things that one should remember and there are many things that one should forget, and what we need to remember most is the reasons and the lessons of the war," he explained.

In his opinion, the horrors of the war, the individual killings and the vendettas are better forgotten, and that takes strong willpower to achieve.

According to Traboulsi, the war also needs to be presented as an objective chronological sequence of events.

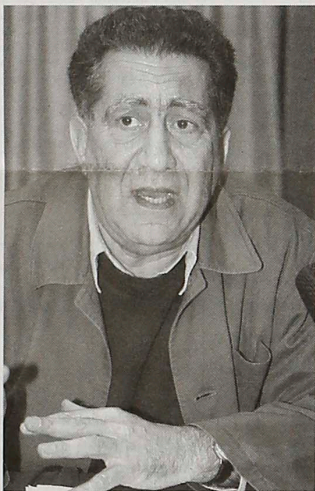
He said this is one thing youth is very interested in learning.

Several years ago Traboulsi began teaching a graduate seminar on the civil war. Every semester the course was offered it was in very high demand and he said it is only for bureaucratic reasons that the university has yet to propose the course as an undergraduate course.

"Many students in the course I give on the history of Lebanon, and on Lebanese politics ask avid questions about the war," he said.

"There is a great need among the young generation to learn about what happened," he added.

Traboulsi said this is a generation that was born during



Traboulsi: The logic is simple – study the war and its causes and perhaps another one can be avoided

Photo by Mahmoud Kheir

the war. Some vaguely remember some chapter and some phases of the war, but the most they know about it comes from their parents.

"They have this big black hole that governs their life, which is the war and they want to know more about it," he said.

"Everybody refers to it, everything around them is a result of it, everybody wants to reconstruct Lebanon and they crave to understand what this war was, and why it took place," he said.

"In my classes, I see that students remember their parents' feelings but they don't remember the events of the war."

Traboulsi said it is a "human right" for the Lebanese to know what happened in the war in the form of a chronology of events.

He said that by referring to the war, people have condensed 15 years of events into one simplistic word.

In his class, Traboulsi said he tried to initiate his students into thinking objectively.

One exercise he relies on is to get people, belonging to one political group, to present the ideological interpretation of the war from the point of view of an antagonist group. For example, a member of the Progressive Socialist Party would present the interpretation of the war from the Phalange's perspective and vice-versa.

With his class, he goes over different interpretations of the reasons behind the war, based on the ideas of both those who participated in it, and those who wrote about it. – A.I.