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ESSAY

## Civic Education and Lebanon

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### Abstract

In Lebanon, the aim of Civic Education transcends mere academic understanding; it seeks to impart comprehension of the government's structure and its operations, indicating a potential civic desert. While traditionally associated with textbooks or a specific curriculum, civics, in its essence, is about ingraining vital social skills. This involves nurturing abilities like communication and critical thinking, particularly in scenarios where traditions collide. Schools, especially those in conflict-stricken areas, shoulder the responsibility of presenting secular values to mitigate potential violence. A robust civics curriculum would necessitate discussions on current and pressing events. However, the prevalent baccalaureate curriculum in Lebanese schools tends to overshadow these crucial conversations. For impactful civic education, teachers play an indispensable role, embodying the values they teach and championing 'mindful learning.' Yet, they grapple with challenges, especially when broaching polarising subjects in a society often resistant to change. Ultimately, uplifting the standard of civic education is an academic imperative, and thorough research is vital to uncover methods that can fortify its delivery effectively.

### Keywords

**Civics; Education; Lebanon; Empathy; Teachers; Civil Disobedience**

12 years old I was, when my teacher—whom I loved and feared for I was mediocre in the language she taught—said: 'You must love your country and help the poor.' At university, during a speech, the president left while the Lebanese anthem was playing. Students attending the lecture conversed. 'Please respect the circumstances,' I said. 'Why should we? The president didn't.' These two incidents led me to question civics, its meaning, and its purpose.

Do Lebanese have civic education? How is it taught at present? Research done by [Frayha \(2003\)](#) reveals that civics has become a stagnant subject, taught for one hour per week across all grade levels. The textbook used in all Lebanese schools is identical and published by the

Ministry of Education. The purpose is to instil Lebanese and Arab identities, objective and knowledge of civil rules. Yet, it is by no means sufficient.

During the Lebanese civil war (1975–1991) and the subsequent conflicts in 2006 and 2008, Lebanese people began aligning more closely with their ethnic, religious, and political affiliations, leading to a diminished sense of national citizenship. This shift was exacerbated by the country's diverse religious sects and numerous political parties, generating significant tension and fostering a preference for affiliating with neighbouring countries rather than with Lebanon itself (Jabbour 2004). Currently, civics education seems to focus mainly on the structure and operations of the government. However, in a communication speech course taught by the researcher, a non-Lebanese student concluded her speech with, 'When you have no identity, you have nothing.' This statement was met with a profound silence from both the class and the lecturer. It raises critical questions: Where is our civic identity? Is there a path to rejuvenating our civic desert?

Perhaps one should first define civics. Civics is the study of the rights, duties and responsibilities of citizens within society. It covers the study of civil law and civil codes, with attention to the role of citizens as opposed to external factors. When civics is not taught, citizens may unwittingly find shelter under different umbrellas, rather than the one large umbrella of their nation: Lebanon.

If one examines the unique political landscape of Lebanon, considering its recent past, including the civil war; the independence uprising that led to the departure of Syrian troops in 2005; the conflict between the Lebanese army and Fatah al-Islam, culminating in the destruction of the Palestinian Nahr el-Bared camp in Tripoli in 2006; and the sectarian violence between two communities in Tripoli in 2012; given such a tumultuous background, combined with political diversity, ongoing conflict and post-conflict situations, deep-rooted social and political tensions, corruption, limited social services, and events too contentious to be documented in a unified History of Lebanon textbook, what kind of civics should be taught?

In light of the inherent diversities in Lebanon, conflict is a potential outcome. As a result, the selection of educational content must reflect the volatile nature of the situation, which has the potential for reescalation. In the face of such diversity, designing educational programs for active citizenship requires thoughtful decisions about content, teaching methods and teacher training, among other factors (Akar 2007).

Lebanon's sociocultural landscape has been uniquely challenging since 2019. Citizens must work diligently and responsibly to enhance their quality of life. 'Modesty is a virtue,' said G. Saliba, a professor of Arabic and Islamic Science at the American University of Beirut (AUB). It's imperative now more than ever to act on this virtue, recognising it as a civic duty. The economic challenges and capital controls have personally led me, a homeowner, to take on the role of a gardener, with the assistance of my son. Tasks such as ploughing, fertilizing, and pruning highlight that in the 21st century, strict divisions of labor might be unnecessary and working the land shouldn't be viewed as demeaning. It's high time for the '*Les Précieuses Ridicules*' (The Affected Ladies) to roll up their sleeves and contribute, even if not in the same manner as I do. This serves as a tangible example of teaching civics through action.

Lebanon's sociocultural context demands not only action but also the power of words. Often, I express my gratitude to professionals who choose to remain in the country by saying, 'Thank you for staying in Lebanon.' I aim to lead by example, sharing the excess produce from my orchard. However, as Aristotle noted, giving requires discernment: knowing whom to give to, when to give, and how much to give. It warms my heart when people bless me, saying, 'May God grant you health and a long life.' Yet, in our current situation, such blessings are tinged with irony. Indeed, health has become a cherished asset due to rising medical costs. And while longevity is traditionally viewed as a blessing, the sentiment is evolving. When some Lebanese hear of a friend's passing, their response is sometimes: 'How fortunate!' It's a sentiment increasingly expressed in today's challenging climate.

While diversity can be linked to destructive conflict, it's crucial to recognise that diversity itself is neither the cause nor the root of conflict. Instead, it reflects differing values and stances among individuals ([Akar 2007](#)). As the French philosopher Pascal noted: '*vérité au deçà, erreur au-delà*' (truth on this side, error beyond).

In Lebanon, the structure of citizenship education curricula, encompassing both national and civic education, is categorised by [Frayha \(1985\)](#) under social studies. The Lebanese government decreed in 1946 that subjects like civics, geography and history should be taught in Arabic. Since then, the educational objective has been to instil a sense of Lebanese nationalism, emphasising Arabic as the primary language of instruction and fostering patriotism by celebrating the nation's historical milestones, landscapes and the civic duties of its citizens. However, during the 1950s, I would boast: '*Je ne parle pas l'arabe*' (I don't speak Arabic). If this was the outcome of civics education in Lebanon, it's time to explore alternative approaches suitable for the Lebanese context.

Civics goes beyond merely being a course or a textbook, as the aforementioned studies indicate. It represents fundamental social learning—emphasising collaboration, establishing communication, and fostering critical thinking when confronted with behaviours or traditions that clash with one's experiences. Nevertheless, schools play a pivotal role. The question arises: which values should they propagate? In conflict-affected regions, tensions can swiftly escalate into renewed conflict. This was starkly demonstrated on MTV Lebanon in 2023 during Marcel Ghanem's program, where supporters of the Free Patriotic Movement and others in the audience clashed violently, reflecting the deep-seated political tensions in the country. Considering 'secular ethics' could pave the way for global social justice in the future (McInnis as cited in [Joseph 2012](#)).

Experts have outlined a curriculum that, if adeptly implemented, promotes advanced civic learning. It incorporates classroom discussions on timely, significant events. However, the dominance of the baccalaureate program in Lebanese schools often leaves scant time for such discussions ([AL-Akl Khoury, 2020](#)). While the International Baccalaureate (IB) offers room for this curriculum, Lebanese schools and their administrations grapple with its application. Implementing the IB demands specialised teacher training, and many parents are hesitant to enrol their children in the program. Notably, families that opt for the IB typically have a higher socioeconomic status.

From my perspective, when tackling contentious issues selected by the students, effective civic education requires not only student training and behavioural adjustments but also a balanced approach of both incentives and deterrents ('the carrot and the stick').

Civics indeed emphasizes critical learning. Currently, civil disobedience can be seen as a manifestation of critical thinking. Some companies, as well as a university, have received funding to explore issues related to Syrian immigrants. These funds, provided by foreign nations, aim to curb illegal migration to Europe. However, some, including myself, believe it's imperative for Lebanese citizens to address the urgent challenges faced by students whose parents can no longer afford school fees.

Empathy stands as a pillar of citizenship; it is both a duty and an obligation, as citizens represent a nation's future. On a Lebanese radio program, individuals in need share their stories. In 2020, I heard a father seeking an iPad for his daughter, now a school necessity. When I offered to lend him mine, he expressed concerns about potential damages he couldn't afford to repair. Ultimately, I decided to gift him my Apple iPad. This gesture felt like a glimmer of hope amidst our dire socioeconomic situation, a beacon in the 'Smile of Misery' we strive to endure. Prominent Lebanese figures displaying empathy can inspire civic-mindedness. In a recent interview with *L'Orient* newspaper, Lebanese Army General Joseph Aoun mentioned that he refrained from dining out, aware of his troops struggling due to meagre salaries and rampant inflation. This act of civic virtue encouraged me to admit openly, 'I cannot afford it anymore.' Both

verbal and non-verbal demonstrations of such values should not only be the responsibility of educators but also be embraced by the entire Lebanese community.

Expressing grievances in a country where civic engagement is lacking is essential. Without voicing concerns, how would citizens become aware of wrongdoing? However, to effectively voice concerns, one must be familiar with the relevant rules and regulations, and know the appropriate channels or individuals to address, especially when civics isn't actively practiced by educators and students.

Education, being an ongoing process, necessitates the fostering and development of civic behaviours. This includes embracing experiential learning approaches where students engage in extracurricular activities, collaborate in teams and devise innovative solutions to problems ([Winthrop 2020](#)).

Communities require modern civic engagement networks. For example, France facilitated opportunities for its non-Muslim communities to visit mosque lounges. This initiative aimed to foster dialogue, deepen understanding, and prevent potential religious and political discord similar to what was observed in Sweden.

Teachers play a pivotal role in imparting civic education. They must deeply resonate with the content they teach, convey it both verbally and non-verbally, and integrate 'mindful learning.' Mindful learning is an emerging concept, focusing on heightened awareness, promoting less aggressive behaviour, fostering compassion, and ultimately cultivating a more peaceful disposition in both learners and educators (Kabat-Zinn quoted in [Joseph 2012](#)). Introducing public service as a form of civic investment, wherein the government covers tuition fees in return for service, could extend civic learning beyond traditional educational settings. For instance, there have been initiatives, such as a recent proposal in a French school, where student public service is exchanged for school supplies.

When considering the factors vital for civic education, a range of socio-personal elements emerges that can influence learning and application, especially regarding controversial topics. This is compounded by the inherent human resistance to change. While discussions on contentious issues and political events present opportunities to engage with diverse viewpoints, certain subjects, such as homosexuality within religious and identity contexts, can reinforce group identities. Questions arise: How might learners respond in such situations ([Sandel 2009](#))? Can civic education create an environment receptive to dissent?

In conclusion, the quality of civic education deserves a prominent place on the academic agenda. Comprehensive research is essential to enhance our understanding of civic education, taking into account cultural and traditional influences that shape the way civics is learned and practiced, with the ultimate goal of producing informed, responsible, and engaged citizens. Can a civics education, imparted by deeply committed educators, encourage students to reevaluate the familiar when confronted with the unfamiliar, leading to deeper introspection ([Sandel 2009](#))?

May my advocacy for improved civic education find an attentive audience,

So that I'm not merely voicing my concerns into the desert.

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