



Education and Prevention of Religious Extremism in Scenarios of Silent Conflict:
A Case Study of Lebanon

Rui Lobo Correia



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Tese para obtenção do Grau de Doutor em Educação

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Tese para a obtenção do grau de Doutor em
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Declaração de Integridade

Eu, Rui Miguel Lobo Correia, que abaixo assino, estudante com o número de inscrição D3210, do Doutoramento em Educação da Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, declaro ter desenvolvido o presente trabalho e elaborado o presente texto em total consonância com o Código de Integridades da Universidade da Beira Interior.

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Universidade da Beira Interior, Covilhã 23/12/2025

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*If you want to make plans for a year, plant wheat seeds;
If you want to make plans for five years, plant trees;
But if you want to make plans for a generation, then plant hope in the youth.*
(Lebanese proverb)

Resumo

Esta investigação explora o papel da educação não-formal na construção da paz em contextos de conflito silencioso, marcados por tensões religiosas e exclusão social. Fundamentada em teorias como a Construção Social da Realidade de Berger e Luckmann, a Pedagogia Libertadora de Paulo Freire e a Imaginação Moral na Transformação de Conflitos de Lederach, e com uma análise histórico-social do cristianismo e islamismo, a investigação visa compreender como a educação pode promover uma consciência crítica que inverta ciclos de conflito e fomente a coexistência religiosa pacífica. O estudo de caso, focado numa ONG no Líbano, envolveu entrevistas semiestruturadas, focus groups e uma abordagem autoetnográfica crítica e reflexiva, exploradas através de análise temática qualitativa. Os contributos incluem perspectivas para uma educação que previna o extremismo religioso, promovendo solidariedade e paz em sociedades vulneráveis, capacitando os jovens a resistirem à radicalização e transformarem tensões em oportunidades de diálogo e cooperação.

Palavras-Chave

Educação não-formal, construção da paz, conflito, violência, religião, extremismo e radicalismo, reconciliação, Líbano.

Abstract

This research explores the role of non-formal education in peacebuilding within contexts of silent conflict, marked by religious tensions and social exclusion. Grounded in theories such as Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction of Reality, Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Liberation, and Lederach's Moral Imagination in Conflict Transformation, and with a historical-social analysis of Christianity and Islam, the investigation seeks to understand how education can promote critical consciousness that reverses cycles of conflict and fosters peaceful religious coexistence. The case study, focused on an NGO in Lebanon, involved semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and an critical reflexive autoethnographic approach, explored through qualitative thematic analysis. The study contributes perspectives on education's role in preventing religious extremism, promoting solidarity and peace in vulnerable societies, empowering young people to resist radicalisation and transform tensions into opportunities for dialogue and cooperation.

Keywords

Non-formal education, peacebuilding, conflict, violence, religion, extremism and radicalism, reconciliation, Lebanon.

At a time when wars are multiplying, it is important to find strategies that break the continuous cycle of conflicts effectively, deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes that feed and mask the origin of these hostilities, namely violent and religious extremism. Education in emergencies is a very important tool in helping to bring about this change, contributing to the psychosocial balance of people affected by wars and to the long-term development of a post-conflict territory. Peace education has the capacity to promote knowledge and skills for social change, capable of developing new peaceful strategies for transforming conflicts at an interpersonal and intergroup level, building a culture of peace in the face of adversity.

However, in order to improve the performance of education in these contexts, various solutions have been created for a coordinated humanitarian response through the IASC (1991), INEE (2004), the Transformative Agenda (2011) and the role of the IRFC (2016) in improving education in humanitarian aid. However, despite recognising the importance of the educational role in these contexts, in emergencies, education takes a back seat (1.4% of total humanitarian aid costs, according to UNOCHA, 2016), as the priority is to build shelters, provide food and health care for the most vulnerable. However, the European Union has shown its commitment to counteracting this situation by funding education in emergencies up to 10 per cent of the humanitarian budget in 2019, maintaining a philosophy of resilience and perseverance (EU Council Europe, 2018). Despite some efforts, the 2020 UNOCHA report shows little improvement in this field of intervention, reaching 2.4 per cent of financial support in the humanitarian budget. In the UNOCHA Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) 2024 report, humanitarian aid for education accounted for 3.3 per cent of the total, demonstrating an increase from 2016 (1.4%) and 2020 (2.4%). However, despite this increase, only 27.4 per cent of the financial needs for education in emergencies were met, highlighting the persistent gap in funding for this sector.

Considering that wars currently last an average of 20 years (Guterres, 2017), we are talking about far too long without positive stimuli to counteract the scenario of wars and conflicts. Government solutions are often expensive and follow a philosophy that is more reactive than preventative to extremist attacks. In these contexts, education can play a decisive role in building a culture of sustainable peace and reconciliatory dialogue in societies fragmented by radical religious manifestations. In order to reduce grooming and membership of extremist groups or forced recruitment by these groups, it is

important to reflect on religious discourse, since religion gives the individual a purpose in the face of uncertainty, feeds their sense of belonging, supports them in their weaknesses and disappointments, assigning different meanings to their individual biography, writing a reading of the world with more or less radical tendencies.

The subject of this research follows on from the master's dissertation¹ entitled *Religious Coexistence in Refugee Camps - Case Study of the Asylum Seekers Reception Centre*, in which "solidarity in tribulation" was identified as a factor in building peaceful religious coexistence in territories of exception, such as refugee camps. The aim of this study was to contribute to understanding solutions in these contexts, as well as being a useful tool to apply in societies fragmented by religious diversity and crossed by existing tensions, as is the case in Lebanon. Thus, this research aims to develop a proposal for tools for peaceful coexistence in adverse contexts fragmented by cultural and religious diversity (the case of Lebanon, which will be the context of our study), with a view to understanding the role of non-formal education in building sustainable foundations that prevent violent extremism from escalating into terrorism. As such, we are partly taking up the ideas and arguments already presented in the aforementioned dissertation, continuing a study that can contribute to understanding peaceful coexistence in adverse territories. To do this, an analysis will be made of the conflict in order to understand the ramification of radicalism and its consequences, and several peace education programmes will be analysed, namely *PEP*² and *Learning for Peace*³, building bridges to understanding the role of religion and prayer, awakening a spiritual dimension based on solidarity in tribulation and cooperation in building sustainable peaceful coexistence. The theoretical basis will be underpinned by Moral Imagination in Conflict Transformation (Lederach), the Social Construction of Reality (Berger & Luckman), Symbolic Interactionism (Goffman) and Paulo Freire's pedagogical approaches, such as

¹ Master's Degree in International Relations - Study of Peace, Security and Development completed in 2020 at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra, in which I developed a case study on CARA (Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo di Bari-Palese).

² The PEP - Peace Education Programme - focuses on three different levels of training for teachers and facilitators, working simultaneously in schools and the local community, through formal and non-formal education. It aims to create constructive behaviours for dealing with problems, minimising or eliminating violence and reducing negative behaviours that can contribute to conflicts.

³ UNICEF's *Learning for Peace* programme, in partnership with the Dutch government, acts as a link between communities and various educational projects that build sustainable peace. This plan has given special importance to gender education, elevating the role of women in counselling, education, conflict mediation and peace-building processes.

Pedagogy of the Heart, *Conscientisation* and Pedagogy of the Oppressed. The research will be based on an exploratory case study of the Lebanese NGO "Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation", which will be subject to a thematic analysis supported by focus groups (young organisers and participants), semi-structured interviews (Christian and Muslim religious leaders) and participant observation with some random interviews.

The text of this research is divided into seven chapters, each addressing different dimensions of the study. The first chapter establishes the theoretical foundations, engaging with theories on peace, conflict, extremism, education, and religion, providing a framework for understanding the intricate dynamics at play. The second chapter offers a historical and sociological analysis of Lebanon, tracing its evolution from its foundation to recent entanglements in conflict. This section contextualises the nation's identity, marked by cultural and religious diversity, and details its religious mosaic. The third chapter explores Lebanon's education system, focusing on challenges amid regional instability. Particular emphasis is given to the role of non-formal education in mitigating the impact of silent war threats, especially in the context of the war in Syria and tensions in the Palestinian region involving Israel, Hamas, and Hezbollah. The fourth chapter presents the research methodology, justifying the choice of a qualitative case study. It outlines the study's objectives, data collection, ethical considerations, and the socio-political context shaping the fieldwork. The fifth chapter introduces a critical reflexive autoethnographic perspective, offering insights from the researcher's fieldwork experience. This section presents ethnographic narratives drawn from interactions with diverse communities, interfaith encounters, and observations of educational initiatives. The sixth chapter provides a thematic analysis of the data collected, structured around two main dimensions: extremism and peacebuilding. It examines factors contributing to violent extremism and strategies for its prevention while also highlighting challenges and opportunities for peace education and reconciliation. The seventh chapter discusses the findings, addressing the research questions. It reflects on factors influencing extremist discourse, strategies to reduce youth vulnerability to radicalisation, and the role of solidarity, cooperation, and interfaith dialogue in fostering peace. The research concludes with an epilogue, introducing the concept of the "Soul of Peace" as a humane and sustainable construction for peacebuilding. This final section presents Contributions to a New Theoretical Framework, exploring its theoretical foundations and practical implications through the work of Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR) in Lebanon's silent conflict.

CHAPTER I

Between Ideas and Realities: Theoretical Foundations of Research

Today, the world is witnessing the largest number of violent conflicts since the end of the Second World War, with around 28 countries experiencing tensions, with the number of attacks in Ukraine, Syria, Myanmar, Yemen and Nigeria standing out (ACLED database, 2022). In January 2024, the data rose to 50 countries at extreme, high and turbulent levels of conflict, placing Palestine at the top due to the geographical spread of the conflict, Myanmar taking into account the increased fragmentation of armed groups, Ukraine considering the number of deaths and Mexico due to the danger to civilians (ACLED, 2024). If the situation was already turbulent in the Middle East given the context of Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan, the terrorist attacks on Israeli cities on 7 October 2023 gave rise to a violent war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which was labelled ethnic genocide against the Palestinian people in January 2024 by the International Court of Justice, resulting in international arrest warrants being issued for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu (Reuters, 2024).

According to Huntington (1993), "the most far-reaching, important and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor (...), but between peoples belonging to different cultural identities. Tribal wars and ethnic conflicts will occur within civilisations⁴" (p.28). He points out that in the case of the Yugoslav war, Russia supported the Serbs diplomatically and Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Libya supported the Bosnians through arms, because of their cultural kinship and not because of economic or political interests. However, this idea contradicts Zartman's assertion that the motivation for these conflicts is a dispute over resources, identity and power through greed, belief and necessity (Zartman, 2005). The Lebanese civil war (1975 to 1990) is an example of this, as it was more than a conflict marked by cultural and religious identity rivalry. Its origin may have been motivated by the economic situation in the country, which shaped the religious ideological discourse in order to cover up other interests in the country's resources, favouring certain groups that prolonged the war for 15 years. The perpetuation of certain behaviours leads to the imposition of certain principles on a group, shaping its identity. According to Bourdieu (1998), *cultural reproduction* tends to prolong economic and social inequalities over generations, emphasising its symbolic power, "which can only be exercised with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they exercise it" (p.7). In this sense, Illich

⁴ The author feeds this idea through examples of ethnic conflicts in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Yugoslavia and Central Asia, arguing that they are supported by other civilisations in the escalation of larger conflicts through "cultural kinship".

(1973) characterises this idea as *passive consumption*, i.e. "an uncritical acceptance of the existing social order" which leads us to reflect on the *hidden curriculum* that teaches individuals that their role is to know their place and "conform to it" (1973, cited in Giddens, 2004). This idea illustrates the social construction of reality as a continuous process, in which society creates and organises concrete conceptual manifestations and human needs. Thus, a sequence is established in which elements are understood, attributing meanings to lived experiences, resulting in everyday life absorbing meanings and purposes, the fruit of constant interaction and interpretation of these social constructions (Luckmann & Berger, 2010). From this point of view, it is necessary to develop new perspectives for reading reality towards a social transformation from persistent conflict to peace processes, retaining some important lessons caused by these scenarios of violence. As stated by Lederach (2005): "the authenticity of social change is ultimately tested in real-life relationships, at the level where people have the greatest access and where they perceive they are most directly affected" (p. 56).

In the context of this research, education (formal or non-formal) can help shape and rebuild this reality marked by violent scenarios with few prospects for development, security and peace, providing small social changes that contribute to reconciliation processes, thus moulding the perception of this reality. Education thus becomes a very important tool for driving social change in societies fragmented by conflict, regardless of its motivations.

1.2. Geography of Violence and Conflict

Armed conflict arises in cases of declared war between two or more parties, even if the state of war is not recognised. It also includes all cases of partial or total occupation of territory, even if that occupation is not met with armed resistance (Geneva Convention, 1949). However, the motivations for conflict vary, taking into account political and ideological interests concealed by greed for resources and ambition for power. As early as the 16th century, Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, stated that conflict arises from human beings' inherent desire for self-preservation, ambition and power, giving rise to discord and turmoil (2007). Hobbes (1651) stated that it was a state that resulted from a dispute over greed, fear of insecurity and the preservation of honour. The sociological perspective of conflict theory argues that the insufficiency of available resources combined with their unequal distribution creates tensions, divisions and interests that lead individuals to initiate processes of violence with the aim of controlling these resources and preserving their power (Giddens, 2004).

The demonstration of violence varies depending on the instruments, culture and context, prolonging various periods of social tension that increase fear, mistrust and uncertainty in the affected population. The WHO⁵ (2002) defines violence as "the intentional use of force or power, actual or threatened, against oneself, against another person, or against a group or community, that results in or is likely to result in injury, death, psychological harm, developmental disability or deprivation" (cited in Coelho et al . 2014, p. 12). The complexity of this concept results from the triangulation of direct, cultural and structural violence, the latter being the result of social inequalities that drive misunderstandings. Structural violence refers to "the social, political and economic processes that reproduce hunger, misery and social, gender and ethnic inequalities" (Coelho et al. 2014, p. 14). However, this violence can occur without the explicit awareness of individuals, and can be considered normatively accepted in a given culture, constituting a form of privilege and domination. This leads us to reflect on cultural violence, which is more subtle, indirect and long-lasting. This arises through beliefs and customs and acts on the way they are used, translating into a "network that legitimises the other two types of violence through its system of norms and behaviours" without it seeming wrong (Galtung, 1996, p. 2). It can be manifested through art, religion, ideology, language and science, and is systematically exercised indirectly without the attribution of individual blame. Farmer (2004) argues that this concept helps to understand individual and collective consciousness itself, lifting the veil on other forms of violence and power, including disruptive power resulting in social processes of oppression and exclusion. However, violence can be expressed in ethnic issues, mirroring a stratification where the distribution of power and resources is regulated, which feeds inequality and subordination, and can normalise extreme and inhumane violence within the group, such as the extermination of the group considered to be the enemy. Huntington (1997, p. 20) reinforces this idea by stating that "we only know who we are when we know who we are not, and often when we know who we are against". In the context of war, sexual violence is often practised en masse as a tactic to weaken the group's perception of itself, transforming its collective and individual thinking as inferior to the other group. In addition to the unspeakable traumas left on the victims (torture, forced pregnancy, rape...), this expression of violence writes a coercive act on the group, even if they haven't suffered this atrocious act directly. The group becomes stigmatised, leaving its mark on

⁵ Concept adopted by the WHO and developed by Etienne Krug, a Belgian doctor and epidemiologist known for his research into injury prevention and violence. He has been director of the World Health Organisation's Department for the Management of Non-Communicable Diseases, Disability, Violence and Injury Prevention since 2014.

subsequent generations, labelling the children of forced pregnancies as *children of bad memories*, *children of hate* (Rwanda), *children of shame* (Kosovo), *children of the enemy* (East Timor), *dust of life* (Vietnam) and *nobody's children* (Peru) (Ganito, 2022). These labels fuel inequality and discrimination and can lead to violent demonstrations and uprisings. However, this act was only condemned internationally by the International Criminal Court in 2001, as a result of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. In the case of armed violence, children are often instrumentalised and subjected to untold suffering, as vulnerability and manipulation are transformed into a capacity for adaptation and resilience for their survival. This involvement increases the power of false security and gives child soldiers a sense of belonging, perpetuating this behaviour in the forced recruitment of new children. For post-conflict peace-building, the UN's DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration) programme aims to help these children reintegrate into society, going through a restorative and therapeutic process to reduce community violence and generating opportunities for these children and adolescents to plan their future with professional training, becoming authors of their own change. At the same time, the objectives of this programme also tend to improve post-conflict political processes and disperse covert armed groups.

In order to gain a better understanding of the construction and reconstruction of the system of conflict and structural violence, it is necessary to look for more effective solutions, bringing governments and humanitarian organisations closer to and more involved with the communities affected by periods of violence. These include bringing together and involving the real needs of the victims, seeking a dialogue of reconciliation that breaks down resentment and cycles of violence, with education playing an essential role in this change.

1.3. *Metanoia, transformation of thought*

In the context of protracted crises, marked by a kind of post-conflict *continuum*, as is the case in Lebanon, it is urgent to create strategies that bring about a transformation in thinking. In realities such as Daadab (Refugee Camp in Kenya), it becomes difficult to implement new ways of thinking when the third generation of people is growing up with no great expectations for the future, because the two previous generations have known nothing but a life of flight and conflict, and are more vulnerable to fuelling this cycle of poverty, since they are not offered different solutions or prospects for the future. To a different extent, something similar is happening in Lebanon, as the multiplicity of

events⁶ that have taken place over the last seventy years has fuelled mistrust and religious division in the following generations, given that despite the growing gap between the well-off and the less well-off, the construction of reality based on social segregation has been more visible in religious and cultural origins, masking the economic and political factors that reflect this stratification.

Metanoia has been a much-discussed term in the transformation of thought, whether in religious conversion or social change, and is essential for conflict transformation. This premise is based on two scientifically studied realities: on the one hand, conflict is normal in human relationships, and on the other, conflict is an engine for social transformation (Lederach, 2014). However, the important thing is to direct this change towards solving specific problems, transforming social thinking towards building healthy communities at a local and global level.

However, the construction of the reality of everyday life presents itself "as an intersubjective world shared and interacted with by other people", making some points of social transformation inaccessible (Berger & Luckmann, 2010, p. 34 and 35). Reality is a "quality belonging to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition" (Berger & Luckmann, 2010, p.13). However, it is often in everyday life, where nothing seems to happen, that these "frivolous and anodyne aspects of social life" often find "conditions and possibilities of resistance that feed their own rupture" (Pais, 2007, p. 30). It is often in this disruption of everyday life that conflict arises in individual or social relationships, providing a social transformation, sustained by the transition in thinking.

In Lebanon, the influence of historical events on social memory is profound, with narratives of sectarian divisions often overshadowing shared experiences of coexistence. This underscores the importance of educational initiatives that encourage critical reflection on these narratives, enabling young generations to develop a nuanced understanding of their shared history. Educational programmes that integrate inter-religious dialogue have demonstrated potential in fostering empathy and solidarity among students from diverse backgrounds.

⁶ [US Intervention (1958), Conflict with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (1969), Lebanese Civil War (1975), Israeli Invasion (1982), Syrian Occupation (1990), Assassination of PM Hariri (2005), Israeli War in Lebanon (2006), Syrian Civil War (2011), Tripoli Conflict (2017), Lebanese Economic Crisis (2019) and Beirut Port Explosion (2020)].

Goffman (1993) talks about the internalisation and symbolic interaction of the *sense of self* in three phases, in an analogy of life embodied in a play, giving various scenic examples such as the script, stage, backstage, audience, performance and façade. The construction of the *sense of self* involves the way the individual sees himself, how he sees the other(s) and his perception of how the other(s) see him. In this way, a constant dialogue is created with the way the individual presents themselves to the world, shaping their behaviour towards the public in front of them, taking into account the role they play. In this conception of the *sense of self*, Mead makes a distinction between the "I" and the "me", with the "I" being more creative and individual, and the "me" being the result of the interaction of the internalisation of society in the individual and their interpretation of the social world. To quote the author, "the "I" is the organism's response to the attitudes of others and the "me" is the organised set of attitudes of others which the individual himself assumes" (Mead, 1972, p.175). According to the author, the "me" is successively transformed by the "I", the latter being more creative in direct confrontation with challenges. The *self*, on the other hand, has a deeper connotation, transcending one's own being, even bridging the gap to spiritual intelligence.

Moreover, the process of metanoia in conflict-affected societies requires not only cognitive shifts but also emotional engagement. Emotional support mechanisms, such as mentorship and peer dialogue, provide individuals with a sense of safety to question inherited prejudices and to embrace alternative perspectives. In this regard, the role of non-formal education emerges as particularly significant, as it offers flexible, community-based learning experiences tailored to the needs of youth in vulnerable settings.

Thus, the social construction of reality takes place in three simultaneous moments: externalisation, objectification and internalisation. This argument is the "basis for understanding our fellow human beings and for apprehending the world as a meaningful and social reality", and our awareness of knowledge and reality is a product of society, constructed and moulded by man and influenced by it (Berger & Luckmann, 2010, p. 137). Ultimately, the individual is only formed from the other, as social relationships mould *the sense of self* (Goffman, 1993). Therefore, in order to transform conflict with a view to achieving sustainable peace, it is necessary to work on the meanings attributed to social interactions.

Lederach (2005) approaches moral imagination as a new direction in transforming conflicts through creativity, breaking new ground for lasting peace. Moral imagination

implies developing the ability to see ourselves in a web of relationships, where those we consider our enemies also exist. On the other hand, it is important to nurture a complex paradoxical curiosity without prejudice, the ability to be creative in the multiple challenges of everyday life and to risk entering the mystery of the unknown, because often not risking can be too great a risk. However, it is in individual and collective biographical experiences that a universe of symbols is built up that incorporate the meaning of events. Thus, the "symbolic universe is constructed through social objectification", in which the "attribution of meanings goes far beyond the realm of social life", placing the individual in even the most solitary experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 2010, p. 106).

However, in realities such as Lebanon, it is necessary to understand the social and individual historical processes in order to rewrite a new chapter marked by periods of peace, because "symbolic universes are social products with a history", and in order to understand their meaning, it is necessary to "understand the history of their production" (Berger & Luckmann, 2010, p. 106). In this sense, the social construction of reality through the meaning attributed to the sense of self in social interactions is fundamental to exploring a creative imagination capable of designing and building educational tools for sustainable peace in societies fragmented by conflict.

Finally, the success of metanoia in Lebanon hinges on sustained collaborative efforts between educational institutions, religious leaders, and civil society actors. Cross-community projects that promote joint participation in social, cultural, and service-oriented activities can serve as practical platforms for building trust and mutual respect. These initiatives, by aligning with the principles of peace education, contribute to the long-term goal of transforming societal perceptions and fostering a culture of peace.

2. [Din, Threskeia and Religio - Roots of Religion](#)⁷

Dīn (دين) is a word of Arabic origin, which conveys a nuanced understanding of religion, emphasising an idea of law and judgement based on a transcendent power. In the Abrahamic traditions, with recourse to the Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic languages, the word *dīn* is often understood as the way, mirroring the sense of submission, loyalty and obedience in order to achieve peace under divine guidance. Thus, *dīn* goes beyond the

⁷ This section takes up the argument developed in the chapter *Homo Religiosus and the meaning of pain and tribulation* in Correia, Rui (2020) Master's thesis: Religious Coexistence in Refugee Camps - Case Study of the Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers (Bari-Palese), University of Coimbra.

sphere of religious practice, underpinning a set of beliefs, rituals, moral norms and social laws that underpin the governance of Muslim life. However, the etymological root of this word leads us to a concept of debt or obligation, creating an unbreakable link in the individual's relationship with God, reminding them of their responsibility to worship and obey the divine. In Greek Classical Antiquity, the concept of religion was not derived from a single word, but from three denominations: *eusebeia* (εὐσέβεια), which was associated with the individual's responsibility for devotion, piety and reverence of the gods; *latreia* (λατρεία) termed servitude and worship; and *threskeia* (θρησκεία) which places worship and religious practice at the centre of human life, turning religion into an immaculate sphere (Saint Augustine, 2012). Cicero explores religion with the word *relegere*, which means "to reread", "to revisit" or "to be connected to", as he argues that religion involves the continuous reinterpretation of religious practices and doctrines. St Augustine argues that "religion is not ordered to God alone, but also to one's neighbours", giving rise to a reinterpretation of the etymology of the word religion to *religare*, which Thomas Aquinas explores as a connection between the individual and the divine being, as the beginning and end of their purpose in the world (Aquinas, 2005, p. 2237).

In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim explains that religion doesn't begin with belief in divinities, but rather as a way of *reconnecting* the living with the dead. In this sense, individuals begin to create new meanings for social rituals, to perform funeral rites and to bury their dead. Thus, the social construction of religious reality arises from the awareness of man's insufficiency and the admission of the fragility and ephemerality of the human condition (Durkheim, 1995). The awareness of the existence of death legitimises the symbolic universes that support individual biography, regardless of mythological or religious interpretations of reality. The legitimisation conferred by death has the task of "enabling the individual to continue living in society after the death of significant others" and preventing their own death in order to maintain their performance in the routines of daily life, mitigating the fear of the end of life (Berger & Luckmann, 2010, p. 110).

In every culture, religion is experienced through symbols, i.e. objects or ideas that are understood by our senses and mind, seeing nothing more than the whole of that meaning. Thus, what feeds the symbols surrounding religion, religious doctrine and the conception of divinity is the human imagination and the individual and social construction that arises from this reality, conceiving an idea of God, which is imperceptible to the senses and logic. The construction of this symbolic universe makes it possible to order the different biographical phases of the individual (child, adolescent

and adult) around the different periods of human evolution, legitimising their meaning as happened in the rites of passage of primitive societies (Berger & Luckmann, 2010).

The conception and acceptance of death and pain appears as a power that results from the symbolic universe and reveals a fundamental and significant character in the construction of the dominant reality of social life. Based on this assumption, pain, suffering and tribulations are closely intertwined with Durkheim's idea of the social construction of religion. Although pain and suffering raise an infinite question of the meaning of evil in any religious consciousness and in the imperfection of a divine creation, religious systems have sought to justify human suffering "in the eyes of God, the gods or the cosmos and to indicate the ways in which men must assume it or combat it" (Le Breton, 2007, p.83). Pain is a consequence of the emergence of conscience and it is from this conscience that man begins to fabricate meanings for the ephemerality of life and the feeling of a divine presence that accompanies and protects him in moments of greatest tribulation. In his letter to the Romans, St Paul says that "not only that, but we also rejoice in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces patience, patience experience, and experience hope" (Rom 5:3-4).

According to Lederach (2005), those who face the most difficult situations of violence and human abuse more genuinely seek solutions to these challenges in favour of lasting constructive change. Probably, for these people, "survival depends largely on intuition, having a sense of what things mean and knowing what people really are beyond their words" (p.38).

Bearing in mind that the sharing of religious knowledge most often occurs during primary socialisation, "however much the original feeling of inevitability may be weakened by subsequent disillusionment, the memory of a certainty that can never be repeated, the certainty of the first dawn of reality" is much more engraved in human consciousness than in worlds internalised during secondary socialisation (Berger & Luckmann, 2010, p. 142). Therefore, when we place this scenario in times of constant adversity, as is the case in Lebanon, individuals consciously or unconsciously attribute different meanings to the ordeal they are trying to overcome. Many feel that "God" has accompanied them on this journey to the present moment of survival, even after all the adversity that has caused them pain, misfortune and unhappiness.

St Augustine (2012) proposes an understanding of suffering as something that can serve higher purposes in the field of God's justice and mercy, emphasising the importance of the trial of the just and the witness of faith to others. On the other hand, the suffering of

the just can also play an important role for the unjust as a means of correcting their actions, providing an opportunity for repentance, conversion and reconciliation with God. St Thomas Aquinas (2005) emphasises patience as a virtue that allows us to endure the moments of greatest adversity with serenity, because this leads to the hope of eternal happiness with God. Under this assumption, Aquinas looks for an intersection between suffering, love and divine providence that offers the individual a deeper and more consoling understanding of their pains and challenges. Thus, in scenarios of greater adversity, marked by dangers, conflicts and violence, the individual has the opportunity to give greater meaning to suffering, even when it is beyond the reach of human comprehension.

In a Jewish context, mirrored in the story of Job⁸, suffering takes on "a place all the more significant because it is certainly intolerable to see God suspend his help and multiply adversity" (Le Breton, 2007, p.91). However, the Christian vision reveals the interpretation of pain not as a "divine punishment inflicted on men with fewer merits", in other words, it is not a consequence of sin or blemish, but rather as "an opportunity to participate in the sufferings of Christ on the cross" (Le Breton, 2007, p.92). Given the accentuation of tribulation, the sense of open wounds and provisional lives, the Christian individual can attribute meanings to their ordeal as a way of drawing closer to God, and rebuilding their path based on faith and building on the reality they have constructed around their recent history. However, this scenario can also be constructed in the opposite way, developing a feeling of revolt and abandonment by a God who wants to punish him for his sins. Therefore, this meaning of pain and suffering can give rise to rebellion, thus adding more situations of conflict to his individual story and to those around him who share the same feeling of abandonment. However, this situation of hardship can also lead the individual to interpret the fundamental religious narratives in a more extremist way, thus adding new symbols, signs and meanings to themselves and the world they live in, and they can develop more fundamentalist attitudes⁹.

For Jews, God means justice, order and mercy, for Christians the fundamental message is love as a way of achieving happiness and, in Islam, the believer submits to God's decrees as a means of achieving peace, not rebelling at times of adversity or suffering that

⁸ The Book of Job, found in the Torah and the Bible, tells the story of a righteous, God-fearing man who suffers various trials caused by pain, due to a challenge between God and the Devil. Given that Job never rebelled against God after all the pain inflicted, God proved to the Devil that he was a worthy man and so gave Job back twice as much as he took from him.

⁹ The origin of the term fundamentalism goes back to the time when there was a need to reaffirm Christian religious dogmas against Christian liberalism and the Enlightenment.

upset them. The Muslim fights evil with the means available, without giving in to revolt or lamentation, because the "evils of this world are trials designed to measure his faith" (Le Breton, 2007, p.99). When we cross-reference Rumi's ideas with St Thomas Aquinas, we realise that despite the difference in their religious ideologies, they both seek the same truth through a theology of love, with Rumi considering all religions as different paths seeking the same truth, because "the language of God is love"¹⁰. These two contemporaries share a close place among the greatest religious thinkers, finding ways to bring religious differences closer together in a common spiritual life, essential for achieving happiness, unity with the divine and inner transformation (Aquino, 2005). However, man's interpretation of his life before God can lead him to paths of peace and serenity or to more extremist and radical thoughts, increasing tensions and conflicts justified by man's interpretation of God's silence, building a cycle of religious violence that takes us from the Middle Ages with the Crusades to the present day with ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah or Jnoud al-Rab¹¹.

2.1. Extremism and Radicalisation

For this research, it is important to understand how the foundation of violent extremism is constructed and developed on the basis of religious teachings, taking into account the distance between motivations, the transformation of religious discourse and the divine message. To paraphrase Delumeau, as cited in Rodrigues (2007), religion is the connection that binds human beings to the sacred, preventing them from feeling disorientated in a world that they will never completely control. The growth of secularisation in the global world has diminished the spiritual dimension that used to help people feel less lost. This has increased a feeling of inner emptiness that makes people want to find a way back to their spiritual home. In this sense, the propaganda for joining extremist groups encourages the individual, as it gives purpose to those who feel in a state of anomie or who don't agree with many systematic situations in their daily lives. Despite the uncertainties, the religious message gives comfort and guidance to the individual, as well as motivating them to develop new meanings for the religious content. In this context, the grounding of the individual religious phenomenon leads to the "individualisation of rationality and consciousness in the matrix of human intersubjectivity" (Luckmann, 2014, p. 91). Iturra (1991) also adds that religion is a set of

¹⁰ From Rumi's poem "The Language of God".

¹¹ Translated as "Soldiers of God", they are a Lebanese Christian extremist group, with no association to any political party, they defend values against LGBT people and communists, and there have been episodes of great violence.

concepts, rituals and spiritual entities that people develop from their experiences throughout history. A case study on religion and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict concluded that the introduction of religious discourse into the conflict often emerges as a means to accelerate personal objectives or those of certain groups that escalate into processes of violence, often contradicting commitments based on religious reasoning (Silvestri & Mayal, 2015).

The concept of extremism does not have a universal definition, as this phenomenon varies depending on the context in which it is developed. Thus, we can understand extremism as a set of beliefs that go against what is normatively accepted in a given society, and violent extremism encourages the use of violence to achieve individual or collective goals. These goals can be very different between those who lead and those who are led. They are usually linked to ideological, ethnic, cultural, political and religious issues, which often mask the struggle for resources, identity and power. This idea is supported by Collier & Hoefler (2000), who state that greed and covetousness build a common path that brings together a set of variables that give rise to initial and subsequent conflicts. The authors also emphasise that the main cause of conflicts is not objective injustice, but greed for resources resulting from commercial opportunities, which can cause power imbalances between different ethnic and religious groups.

In the case of Al Qaeda and Boko Haram, the propaganda processes focus on manifestations of hatred, violence and religious, cultural and social intolerance. In this context, the groups involved distort and exploit "religious beliefs, ethnic differences and political ideologies to legitimise their actions" with the aim of increasing the number of followers¹² and consequently individual and collective power. Ideology is understood as "the instrument, which activates the meaning-making process that guides participants in their choice to justify their pursuit of their fundamental human needs, including identity, community and a sense of purpose" (Fahed & Merhej, 2020, p. 413).

UNESCO defines the practice of religious extremism as corresponding to "beliefs and actions that support violence to achieve religious goals" (Hanif et al, 2019, p. 493).

Extremism is just one ramification of radicalisation, which is caused by various interests fuelled by an unbridled ambition for resources and power. Given the ambiguity of the concept, radicalisation is a "non-linear process of developing beliefs, feelings and actions in support of any group or cause in conflict with greater motivation to use violent means

¹² E4J University Module Series - Counterterrorism (Module 2: Conditions that facilitate the spread of terrorism, available at <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/pt/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/radicalization-violent-extremism.html>).

against members of a group or symbolic targets" (Doosje cited in Fahed & Merhej, 2020, p. 398).

It should be borne in mind that radicalisation can be identified in non-state groups, but also in many government parties that deny this claim. Often, what differentiates them is the legitimacy of their actions, regardless of what they actually do. One example in the Lebanese government is the parliamentary representation of Hezzbolah¹³ and its allies, currently with 62 deputies out of 128 seats (2022 elections), whose discourse often calls for the end of the State of Israel, considering it illegitimate, since the country's basis of governance is based on the Zionist movement¹⁴.

Extremism, radicalisation and terrorism are interlinked through violence and what distinguishes them is often a very fine line, taking into account the place, the context and the temporal space, corresponding to small variations in the escalation of violence.

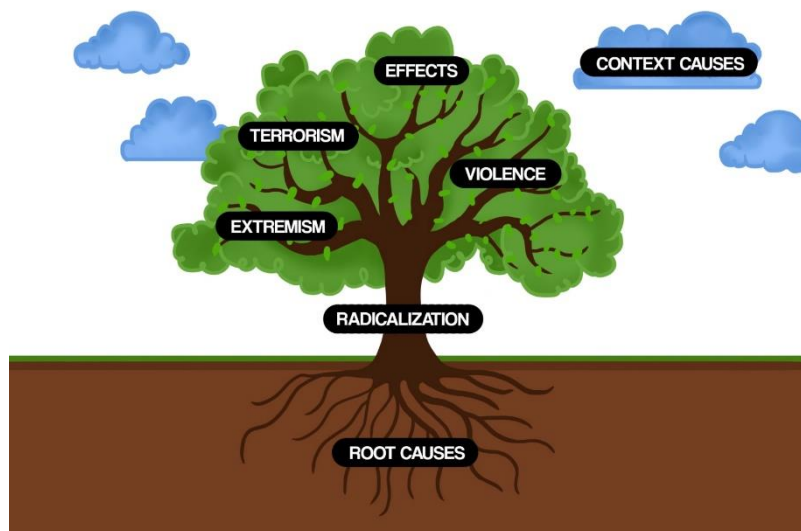


Figure 1 Conflict and Radicalisation Tree (Fahed & Merhej, 2020)

Figure 1 shows the causes and effects of radicalisation, taking into account the pressure of the context and historical roots. This tool was used in the analysis of a case study carried out in Lebanon with ex-combatants in order to understand the processes of

radicalisation and deradicalisation. This study helped to understand how the normality

¹³ It is considered a legitimate Shia Muslim resistance movement in a large part of the Muslim and Arab world, with its origins in Iran. However, it is also considered a terrorist organisation by several countries (USA, UK, Germany, Argentina, Israel, Canada and the Netherlands). It emerged in Lebanon as a response to the Israeli invasion in 1982 and grew in popularity with its actions and speeches until it won a parliamentary seat in Lebanon. It currently has a radio and television station, increasing its ability to spread its discourse. With financial support from Iran and Syria, it has a significant military force. In 2013, the European Union considered the military force to be terrorists, leaving out the partisan group.

¹⁴ Also known as Jewish nationalism, it is a political movement that defends the Jewish people's right to self-determination and the creation of an independent and sovereign Jewish national state in the territory where the Kingdom of Israel once existed. This thinking condemns the occupation of Palestine by non-Jewish individuals, leading to the ideological criticism of it being a colonialist movement.

of violence was assimilated and the processes of trust and naivety of those who fought under more radical ideologies. The causes were often due to the "normality" of political violence and the effects were political violence itself. Although ideologies help to justify certain violent actions, this study concluded that ideology should not be considered the main focus of radicalisation. It is considered more beneficial for the quality of the de-radicalisation processes to develop actions to raise awareness and understanding of the violence itself, since the aggressive actions used by the combatants were considered normatively accepted and they had no idea of what was right or wrong.

Taking a deeper look at the metaphor adapted from Fisher (2000) in figure 1, the author characterises roots as the deep, underlying causes of conflict, such as perceptions or unresolved historical and social issues, which, although not immediately visible, remain dormant in the social stratum of a people, the result of negotiations or incomplete resolutions of a conflict situation. In this scenario, ideology and beliefs (extreme nationalism and religious fundamentalism) begin to gain more power due to social discontent mirrored in inequality and injustice, contrasting government corruption with poverty and lack of access to basic resources for some social strata. Thus, social exclusion and the marginalisation of certain ethnic-religious groups, in a melting pot of traumatic past experiences (civil wars, genocides or persecutions), make up a set of ingredients that very easily awaken in a group the need for revolt and violence in order to achieve social transformation, often supported by external funding for radical groups.

The trunk of the tree symbolises how these causes manifest themselves, creating power dynamics that shape and sustain the conflict, improving communication channels to attract and manipulate new recruits. The branching of the tree corresponds to the specific disputes that arise from the initial conflict, clarifying the emerging problems between the parties involved. Extremist groups grow and become increasingly organised, capable of creating more radical or terrorist coups, enticing or forcing more and more recruits, fuelling a feeling of mistrust and fear.

Thus, the leaves of the tree symbolise the visible effects of the conflict, such as violence, lack of mutual trust, resentment, human and material losses, and the emotional and social consequences for those going through the journey of the conflict. In this context, kidnappings, murders, attacks and bombings, the displacement of populations, as well as social polarisation, in which the increase in socio-religious divisions and the growth of hate speech become visible.

Clément (2023) puts a special focus on emotional narratives in radicalisation and militancy, developing the concept of *narrative emotionalisation*, in which the "political narrative becomes strongly emotionalised and explains how this, in turn, impacts the

possibilities of interpretation by the audience and, ultimately, collective action (p. 16). Thus, the reading of emotions in the context of conflict, uncertainty and fear can play a fundamental role in the individual or social constructive process of radicalisation, exploring intense emotions such as anger, resentment or fear. This perspective reinforces a group's identity and sense of belonging, developing discourses that justify violence, as well as promoting solidarity and cohesion among members of a radical group.

Radical or extremist leaders often use religious discourses in their propaganda, not only as a means of linking their personal interests and goals to the emotional fragility of those facing an identity crisis and relative deprivation, but also by exploiting a sense of victimisation that arouses resentment and a desire for revenge, creating empathy and mobilising support. In order to justify human losses in processes of revolution, narratives of heroism, sacrifice and honour are used as an incentive to a greater cause, even using divine determination, inspiring others to follow the example of martyrdom in strategies of social transformation. One of the important processes in this discourse is to transform the enemy as inhuman, thus facilitating violence against them without a burden on the conscience. In this way, the social construction of propaganda and emotional manipulation strengthen collective objectives, sustaining militancy and the group's resistance to adversity.

Often government reactions to terrorist attacks can also play a key role in accelerating the conflict, feeding the radical narrative, or they can also turn the situation around with their discourse, paving the way for de-radicalisation. Tichatschke (2023) recommends integrated strategies that link security, education, community involvement and social support as a way of preventing extremism, as well as more inclusive policies that promote national unity and cohesion, mitigating social inequalities and the stigmatisation of certain groups that are often at the root of revolutionary movements. Education is also a fundamental strategy for de-radicalisation and conflict transformation, discussing issues of prevention and awareness of radicalisation among students, as well as training teachers who are able to recognise signs of radicalisation and intervene more effectively, projecting the construction of values such as tolerance and citizenship. In this sense, Clémont's (2023) emotional narratives can also play a key role in neutralising the emotional tendencies of radical groups, discussing strategies that promote positive emotions such as reconciliation, hope and peace.

3. Labyrinth for Peace

Building a peace system is often a difficult maze to navigate in order to find the right path towards sustainable peaceful coexistence. Entering this journey involves making choices

and decisions, in the knowledge that you will make mistakes at various points. In fragmented societies, marked by protracted crises perpetuated by post-conflict, decision-making can magnify the risks and consequences. In the most adverse places, *peacebuilders* are faced with these choices every day, trying to counter cycles of violence in favour of a non-violent path in conflict situations. However, people affected by hostilities need to be more involved in order to create a sense of responsibility, taking on the role of authors in conflict transformation.

Peace often occupies a place of anonymity, travelling through a silent routine, because it is not measured in space or time, and is diluted in calculated representations, where the scenario of war and violence take centre stage before peace, distorting the perception of social rhythms. Thus, we can speak of the concept of *imperfect peace*, which suggests the regulation of conflict in a peaceful manner, in which those involved have chosen to accept and satisfy the needs of others without resistance (Pureza, 2009). This concept aims to dismantle the false opposition between peace and conflict, considering that "peace is experienced in a universe marked by conflict", because the aim is not to eliminate conflict, since it is a "dynamic of social change" (Pureza, 2009, p. 10). Therefore, *imperfect peace* mirrors a dynamic value system where peace and conflict coexist, providing social transformation towards peaceful outcomes, maintaining an unfinished record of moments of peace.

In Greek mythology, the Triad of the Hours¹⁵ reflected harmony, balance and well-being, personified by *Eirene*, goddess of peace, *Dike*, goddess of justice who regulated conflicts peacefully and *Eunomia*, goddess of good government and balance of individual and collective aspirations. Therefore, under this conception, the ideology of positive peace was already being projected, making a clear connection that, in order to achieve peace, a system of values balanced between justice and governance is necessary. The *Pax Romana* was very much based on economic prosperity and the security of socio-political structures, maintaining an idea of domination over other peoples, warding off external threats by imposing peace based on law and the strength of the Roman legions. Meanwhile, Seneca (4 BC - 65 BC) brought "equality" as a new fundamental ingredient for peace, opposing slavery and discrimination against women or other disadvantaged groups.

About 1500 years later, Hobbes (1588 - 1679) refuted the idea of equality as essential for a peaceful society, arguing that equality "determines the primacy of competition, distrust and the pursuit of glory as the regulating principle of human lives, thus leading to a state

¹⁵ They were a group of goddesses who governed the seasons and personified order in the world.

of war" (Purity, 2009, p. 26). According to the Renaissance author, the solution to war is to accept submission to the one who rules, to whom everyone's survival is entrusted. Kant (1724 - 1804) argued that internal politics was the driving force behind peace and war. Kant's ambition was to look for ways to build perpetual peace, rather than circumstantial or temporary peace. To this end, he argued that internal governance organised by the principle of the separation of powers and representative government was necessary, bridging the gap with today's advocates of a liberal peace, which often fuels new paths to a liberal war.

The UN defines a culture of peace as "a set of values, attitudes, forms of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent it by addressing its root causes in order to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation between individuals, groups and nations" (United Nations, 1998a; 1998b). The concept of peace is very complex and can always be criticised by some theorists. Galtung (1969) deepens this concept, making a distinction between *negative peace*, understood as the absence of direct violence; and *positive peace* as something that goes beyond the negation of this violence. In this case, positive peace is directed towards a structural peace whose ambition is to eradicate socio-economic inequalities, extinguish cultural violence and contribute to effective social integration at an individual and global level. Wiberg (2005) states that the concept must respect the following topics: *equity and well-being*, i.e. the absence of structural violence, *freedom* as the absence of oppression and *identity* as the absence of alienation or cultural violence.

There are authors who argue that often in order to achieve peace we have to give up justice or in order to have justice, we have to give up peace, extending an imperfect but realistic cycle of coexistence between peace and conflict. Rawls (2001) supports this idea through the concept of unjust peace, suggesting that, in many situations, achieving peace may require giving up justice, and vice versa, depending on historical and social circumstances. He argues that it is important to prioritise peace and social stability, even if this means sacrificing justice. Amartya Sen (2006) reinforces this idea, pointing out that in societies with deep ethnic, religious or cultural divisions, it is more important to promote a culture of dialogue and tolerance to the detriment of distributive justice. Galtung (1969) emphasises that achieving peace often involves accepting compromises that may not be completely fair to all parties. In the reconstruction of post-conflict territories, where dialogue has the opportunity to prevail, many academics argue that reconciliation and stability should be prioritised over the full punishment of those responsible for war crimes, as conviction can reignite tensions and undermine sustainable peace. However, this approach generates controversy, as impunity for those

guilty of human rights violations during conflict can undermine trust in institutions and perpetuate violence and injustice, making peaceful coexistence more difficult. Lederach (2014) suggests that it is essential (although not the only way) to provide a constructive dialogue between justice and peace, both in the interpersonal and structural fields, in order to achieve social balance and reduce violence.

Therefore, throughout history, the concept of peace has been the subject of many transformations and reflections, being essential for harmony and peaceful coexistence between peoples. In this labyrinth, new perspectives have been studied, improving ideologies from classical to contemporary thinkers, opening up a starting point for post-liberal peace in the construction of multiple micro-peaces, where "resistance with empathy and daily living" coexist (Pureza, 2009, p. 70). Richmond (2009) points out that peacebuilding approaches are often too committed to universal liberal principles and are limited when applied in post-conflict contexts. Thus, the author argues that the concept of post-liberal peace offers a more critical and inclusive perspective on building sustainable peace, overcoming traditional challenges more easily and suggesting solutions that are more appropriate and sensitive to local realities. From this point of view, peacebuilding is developed in a *bottom-up* process, in which the experience and voices of those most involved and affected by the traumas of conflict are truly represented at political level.

Amartya Sen (1999) converges on a path towards the development of a just peace, arguing that social, economic and political development depends on the expansion of substantive freedoms, which promotes justice in all areas, building a peace that does not just avoid violence, but also contributes to a just and equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to prosper. Villa-Vicencio (2009), in exploring political reconciliation after Apartheid in South Africa, emphasises that justice, truth and reconciliation are fundamental to an inclusive and participatory process for the reconstruction of a post-conflict territory. Restorative justice seeks to repair relationships affected by conflict, following a pedagogy of forgiveness and restoration of communities, balancing demands for justice with strategies to achieve peace. According to the author, this commitment can contribute to a convergence between peaceful coexistence and a more just society. However, in order to achieve a just peace in post-conflict territories, it is necessary to develop a role for truth and reconciliation, making human rights violations transparent and recognising victims, as a way of re-establishing people's trust in government institutions. In order to build a culture of peace, it is essential to develop safe spaces for dialogue and tolerance, opening up a path towards a

just peace, supported by an inclusive and sensitive education for peace, which can teach new generations to value justice, respect, freedom, forgiveness and peace.

The concept of peace often follows a similar path to Thomas More's description of the island of Utopia, in which a perfect society is designed based on principles of justice, equality and harmony, where the population enjoys a peaceful life by resolving their interests through dialogue and negotiation. The concept of peace aims to awaken in the individual an inspiring ideal that leads them to dream of a better world, even though this peace process is often beyond their reach. Therefore, given the difficulty in defining this concept, which is constantly under discussion, it would be good to understand peace as a holistic system, in which there must be "basic structural conditions, including the absence of organised physical and psychological violence", satisfying basic needs in institutional structures and "proportional sharing of power", guaranteeing the promotion and protection of human rights (Freire & Lopes, 2008, p.17).

The 16th Sustainable Development Goal (Agenda 2030) aims to bring us one step closer to this ideal of the island of Utopia, emphasising the importance of promoting peace, justice and effective institutions, as a global strategy, as a way of achieving sustainable peace, bringing together integrated actions to eradicate poverty, promote social justice and protect the environment. In order to build sustainable peace, it is necessary to make an ongoing commitment to social justice, environmental care, human rights and inclusive economic development. In addition, it is necessary to build resilient and equitable societies, not by silencing the root causes of conflicts, but by seeking dialogue and reconciliation for peaceful coexistence between different ethnic, religious and social strata.

[3.1. Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Peacebuilding¹⁶](#)

Over the centuries, religious principles have offered various teachings and practices to achieve peace, justice and reconciliation, through the scriptures, systems of charity and social justice. However, their success has mostly depended on the discourse of their leaders and reactions to threats to their faith.

If we go back a little to the history of the Middle Ages, we can see that there were times and places where Christians, Muslims and Jews lived together in harmony, such as Muslim Spain, the *millet* system during the Ottoman Empire or the unity of the syncretic Din-i Ilahi faith in Akbar's India. However, over the last 1,400 years, Europe, the United States of America and Islam have fuelled an idea of opposition and confrontation, leading

¹⁶ Development of subchapters of the master's thesis "Peaceful Coexistence in Refugee Camps" (Correia, 2020, chap.I).

to various states of conflict. This has fuelled prejudices and stereotypes, labelling Islam as the enemy.

Islam is a religion of peace, because if we go to the Arabic origin of its meaning, we find that Islam derives from **s-l-m** which means peace and, in a second sense, submission, being understood as a whole as the peace that comes when we surrender our lives to God (Smith, 2005). However, from the perspective of a social religion, Islam is marked by two ideologies about peace: "an inner one, made up of personal well-being and harmony, and a public one, materialised in the regulation of relations between groups through pacts or agreements" (Pureza, 2009, p. 17). Following an ideology of the separation of the sacred and the profane, Islam also defends the division of the world between the territory of *Peace/Islam (daral-Islam/dar-al-salam)* and the territory of war or the infidel (*dar-al-harb or dar-al-kufr*).

Those who practise this religion are called Muslims¹⁷ and not, as it is sometimes referred to, Islamists, thus distinguishing Islamic militancy from the Muslim faith. Muslims must believe in the *Torah* revealed to Moses, the Psalms revealed to David and the Gospel revealed by Jesus¹⁸. According to Thowhidul Islam (2018), they must believe in all the other holy books as messengers of God without any discrimination, because Muhammad's mission was not to establish a new religion, but rather to clarify the divine message announced to previous prophets and purge it of misinterpretations (Islam, 2018). It should be noted that many Islamic principles are based on the philosophy of St Augustine¹⁹, namely the unshakeable affirmation of absolute divine transcendence, the serene acceptance of God's will and the hope in salvation granted exclusively through his mercy (Corbain, 2008). If they had lived at the same time, perhaps the dialogue and understanding between these religions could have been a point of unity between the two religions.

The history of Christianity is also made up of countless persecutions, from the infanticide decreed by Herod to the flight of Jesus and his parents to Egypt, from the perceived threat of the Jewish faith to the Roman oppression of Christians, leading them to atrocious deaths in the arenas. However, history also tells us how Christianity went from persecuted to persecutor in the cruel tortures of the Inquisition and the Crusades, repressing Muslims and heretics. Its history is complex, often in the pursuit of power, yet

¹⁷ The word Muslim derives from the Arabic verb "aslama", which means "submitted to God".

¹⁸ "We believe in Allah, what has been revealed to us, what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets by their Lord; we make no distinction between them, and we submit to Him" (Qur'an, al-Baqarah 2:136).

¹⁹ He died two centuries before Mohammed, having developed new religious philosophies that had a great influence not only on the Christian church, but on the geographical area where it was located.

its spiritual principles lead believers to love their neighbour as themselves²⁰ , building bridges of peaceful coexistence.

To this end, various councils were held in the search for a common orientation for all Christians in the world, given the evolution of their expansion in favour of a peaceful society. The first seven ecumenical councils²¹, held between 325 and 787, were recognised by the Catholic, Orthodox, and Eastern Churches. These councils addressed crucial theological questions, including the nature of Christ, the Holy Trinity, and the relationship between the divine and human in Jesus Christ. For instance, the First Council of Nicaea in 325 condemned Arianism and affirmed the doctrine of consubstantiality, while the Council of Ephesus in 431 declared Mary as Theotokos (Mother of God), safeguarding the unity of Christ's identity.

However, these gatherings did not focus exclusively on doctrine and definitions of dogma. They also laid the foundations for ecclesiastical legislation, regulating aspects such as clerical discipline, liturgical practices, and the relationship between the Church and secular authorities. Additionally, local traditions were considered, with the intention of fostering unity without suppressing the cultural particularities of different communities (Corbin, 2008).

Despite these efforts, differences became more pronounced over the centuries. Disputes over theological interpretations, liturgical practices, and ecclesiastical authority – particularly regarding the primacy of the Bishop of Rome – led to growing divisions. This divergence culminated in the Great Schism of 1054, which formalised the separation between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, each following distinct theological, liturgical, and canonical traditions. The schism was not the result of a single event but rather the outcome of centuries of accumulated disagreements and political tensions.

Thus, while the ecumenical councils played a significant role in shaping Christian identity and promoting unity, the persistence of doctrinal and cultural differences ultimately led to permanent divisions that continue to characterise Christianity today.

²⁰ This idea is reproduced several times in the Bible (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Romans 13:8; Galatians 5:14; Luke 10:27-28; Mark 12:31).

²¹ 1st Council of Nicaea (325), still in the aftermath of the Roman persecutions; 1st Council of Constantinople (381), 1st Council of Ephesus (431), Council of Chalcedon (451), 2nd Council of Constantinople (553), 3rd Council of Constantinople (680) and 2nd Council of Nicaea (787).

Even at this time, the origins of peaceful coexistence between religions, from a Muslim perspective, can be traced back to the period when Mohammed migrated to the city of Medina as a messenger from God to unite the warring tribes that had been decimated by the constant civil wars. Having met the Jewish community in this city, Muhammad sought their cooperation to develop this society and defend it from internal oppression and external aggression, thus becoming a multi-religious city-state with rights and duties for all religious groups, with Jewish citizenship and the legitimacy of their religion being recognised (Abdulazeez, 2013). Later, the Arab Christians of Narjan came together in this territory, motivated by the peaceful coexistence and co-operation between these peoples. This union guaranteed religious freedom, the prohibition of crime and the privilege of human life in the city (Abdulazeez, 2013). This agreement of tolerance²² was respected by Muhammad's successors, even after the fall of Jerusalem during the time of the Crusades, endeavouring to respect the beliefs of the Jews and Christians of Byzantium. We can consider this an example of a *bottom-up* strategy, because when this measure was proposed in Medina, 45 per cent of the population were non-Muslim Arabs, 40 per cent Jews and only 15 per cent Muslims (Islam, 2018).

Among the many examples of territories ruled by Muslims, Spain (711-1492 AD) is one of the best examples of peaceful coexistence between various cultures and religions, guaranteeing Christians and Jews the practice of their faith without restrictions, using their places of worship for free, sharing the wealth of Cordoba²³ and holding various positions in the royal court. The coexistence of Christian, Muslim and Jewish traditions had a major impact on the construction of Spanish culture and was fundamental to the prosperity of this region, becoming known as Spain's golden age (Smith, 2005).

While Islam was striving for unity among its faithful, the Christians were showing signs of discord, which became apparent with the Eastern Schism in 1054. The Eastern Churches began to assert their influence in their Patriarchates, eventually moving away from Byzantium²⁴, due to cultural influences and geographical location (Filoramo, 2007). As these churches were more vulnerable due to their proximity to Muslims, they became accustomed to living with their sovereigns marked by a *continuum of*

²² The Charter of Medina was drawn up in order to put an end to the conflicts between the tribes of Aus and Khazraj in the city, forming a single community with rights and responsibilities for Muslim, Jewish and pagan groups.

²³ Cordoba was the capital of Muslim Spain and was known for its immense wealth.

²⁴ Early on, the Coptic Church was formed in Egypt, the Nestorian Church in Syria, and the Ethiopian, Armenian and Persian Churches were created with distinct traditions.

uncertainty, as they preferred to speak of Muslims in ethnic rather than religious terms, labelling them Saracens²⁵ (Brown, 1999).

Just as the Churches of the East coexisted with Muslims in periods of uncertainty, in the West authority, power and intolerance took on new contours, giving rise to various Protestant reforms that confronted "the idea of freedom" and condemned the abuse of ecclesiastical power (Corbin, 2008). With the Schism of the West in 1517, the Western Church disintegrated, giving rise to new philosophies and religious structures²⁶, and a profound reform within the Catholic Church marked by the Council of Trent, which began in 1545 and ended in 1563 (Filoramo, 2007).

From its early history, Christianity demonstrated a restrictive stance towards certain cultural practices and belief systems, particularly those associated with pagan traditions in the Roman Empire. Early Christians, for example, refused to participate in public festivals honouring Roman deities, such as the Saturnalia and the Lupercalia, as these practices were perceived as incompatible with monotheistic belief (Fox, 1987, p. 154). This non-participation extended beyond religious ceremonies to social gatherings such as banquets, which were often accompanied by ritual libations to the gods. Corbin (2008) highlights how Christians were discouraged from attending such events, as these social gatherings were often associated with religious practices that the Christian community considered incompatible with their faith, leading to a progressive marginalisation in certain social contexts.

In addition, Christian communities distanced themselves from popular public spectacles like the gladiatorial games. Tertullian, in his work *De Spectaculis*, vehemently condemned these events, describing them as a celebration of cruelty and bloodshed incompatible with Christian ethics (Tertullian, c. 197/198, chap. XV). The rejection of such spectacles, along with the refusal to participate in civic cults, led to growing societal tension. Stark (1996, p. 67) argues that these forms of social exclusion, although they hindered the integration of Christians into Roman society, also served as a mechanism of internal cohesion, strengthening community bonds and reinforcing group identity.

However, this distinction also had political repercussions. The Roman authorities, viewing religious practices as integral to social cohesion and political unity, interpreted the Christian refusal to participate in public cults as a sign of disloyalty to the empire. This perception contributed to periodic waves of persecution, including those ordered by

²⁵ Saracen means descendant of Ishmael, Abraham's bastard son with the slave girl Hagar.

²⁶ Lutheranism, Calvinism and Anglicanism.

emperors Nero, Decius, and Diocletian (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.2).

Thus, the early Christian position regarding traditional cultural practices was not merely theological but also sociologically significant, as it shaped the group's distinct identity while simultaneously provoking societal and political conflict (Corbin, 2008).

In a history drawn from the persecuted to the persecutor, the Second Vatican Council represents a major turning point in the history of Christianity, seeking dialogue and understanding rather than judgement and condemnation. This set of documents emphasises not only religious freedom or freedom of conscience but also accepts that salvation can be achieved in other religious denominations (Second Vatican Council, 1965, *Nostra Aetate*; *Dignitatis Humanae*). Paraphrasing the document *Nostra Aetate*²⁷ (1965) in relation to Islam, it suggests that while it is true that over the centuries many disagreements and hatreds have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this Council calls on everyone to leave the past behind, sincerely practise mutual understanding and work together to defend and promote social justice, moral values, peace and freedom for all people. This Council was the first step towards a path of peace, freedom and dialogue that prompted a change in thinking towards a path of communion. However, it was with Pope John Paul II that the contours of the Second Vatican Council took on a new dynamism, promoting dialogue with the Anglican, Lutheran and Orthodox Churches and with Buddhism, being a close friend of the Dalai Lama. But his actions went further when he kissed the Koran after praying in the Mosque of the Umayyads in Damascus, becoming the first Catholic pope to do so. In addition to this rapprochement with Islam, he was also the first pontiff to enter a synagogue and pray at the Western Wall, placing a letter between the cracks in the bricks, asking for forgiveness for the persecutions against the Jews (Vatican, 1998). Throughout his pontificate, he made countless trips promoting peace and interreligious dialogue, apologising for Christianity's past, namely to the Muslims persecuted during the Crusades, the victims of the Inquisition and all those who suffered at the hands of the Catholic Church, from indigenous slavery, the violation of women's rights and sexual abuse by members of the clergy.

In addition to his apostolic journeys, he also initiated the Day of Prayer for Peace²⁸ in Assisi in 1986, bringing together various leaders of different religions, passing on a

²⁷ Second Vatican Council Declaration on the Church's Relations with Non-Christian Religions.

²⁸ This event, which began in Assisi in 1986, was repeated in 1993 with the end of the Bosnian War and in 2002 after the 11 September attacks.

message of peace and reinforcing Bishop Paglia's idea that 'religions don't create conflicts, but people do' (BBC News, 2002). This event, held in the birthplace of Saint Francis of Assisi – a figure known for his message of peace and interfaith dialogue – marked a significant step towards religious reconciliation. For the first time, representatives from over 50 religious traditions gathered to pray side by side, not for theological unification, but for the shared commitment to peace. This gathering later inspired the concept of *Homo Assisiensis* – the 'Human Being after Assisi' (*L'Homme Selon Assise*), a symbolic representation of humanity united by the principles of dialogue, solidarity, and mutual understanding. As Pope John Paul II emphasised during the event, peace cannot be imposed but must be built collectively, through respect, cooperation, and the recognition of the dignity of all human beings, regardless of their religious beliefs (João Paulo II, 1986).

Pope Francis has followed this path of dialogue, having recently signed a document with Pope Tawadros II²⁹ seeking "not to repeat the Baptism administered in one of our Churches to someone who wishes to join another" (Francis, Vatican, 2017). This step signifies a great rapprochement with the East, seeking to heal the wounds opened almost a millennium ago by the Eastern Schism. In addition to this important example of promoting peace, the current Pope has also promoted unity between Al-Azhar³⁰ and the Catholic Church through the *Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, declaring to build a "culture of dialogue as the path; common collaboration as the conduct; mutual knowledge as the method and criterion" (Francis *quoted in* Vatican, 2019, p. 111).

In addition to emphasising that religions never incite war, hatred and extremism, it is stated that these situations are the result of the deviation of religious teachings, the political use of religions and the interpretation of people who have abused their religious influence on human hearts, leading them to actions that do not respect the meaning of religion, with the aim of achieving political and economic ends (Francis, Vatican, 2019). In this sense, the appeal is made to stop using religion to incite hatred and violence, because God "does not need to be defended by anyone and does not want his name to be used to terrorise people" (Francis *quoted in* Vatican, 2019, p. 110).

²⁹ Coptic Orthodox Patriarch of Egypt.

³⁰ The University of Shiite Theology founded in 988 (second oldest in the world) located in Cairo, which brings together Muslims from the east and west.

It is increasingly important to understand the faith of the "other" as a strategy for building models of peace. As far as Islam is concerned, it is important to understand its principles as a religion of peace and moderation. *Wasatiyyah* (the Arabic concept of moderation) means a middle path between extremes, seeking a moderate, fair and balanced life, with temperament and gentleness in one's actions (Islam, 2018). This is a way of avoiding extremism and intolerance, building peaceful coexistence between different peoples, tribes and religions. The idea of this concept is to give a common orientation to all Muslims physically and spiritually, being one of the basic principles of social life in Islam, contributing to peaceful coexistence in an inclusive society.

Looking at what has been written, we can understand the Muslim faith as a religion that seeks peace and not war. However, the spotlight often focusses on the Islamic meaning of *jihadism* or holy war, a term that has been misunderstood or misinterpreted. In reality, *Jihad*³¹ literally means "striving" or "exerting effort" in the path of Allah with two distinct dimensions: "the internal Jihad that seeks to curb the negative and self-destructive forces within, and the external Jihad, which is a struggle against violence and tyranny through words and actions" (Abdulazeez, 2013). Therefore, the concept of *jihad*, contrary to many interpretations distorted by other interests, promotes religious coexistence in society, condemning persecution, corruption and social anarchy. In fact, the principles of Islam even prohibit acts of violence against anyone, including non-Muslims.

Abdulazeez (2013) points out that even during times of war, Mohammed explicitly warned Muslim armies not to destroy non-Muslim places of worship. However, *dar-al-sulh* (truce territory) was decreed as a means of achieving peace between the "infidels" in exchange for the payment of a tribute and *dar-al-ahd* (covenant territory), in which non-Muslim landowners were protected from any attack in exchange for taxes. Islam sought various diplomatic strategies to maintain peace with the treaties of *hudna* (coexistence with other religious communities and even Muslims who had renounced the faith), legal and social practices to protect the *harbi* (enemy-infidel) with the treaty of *aman* (protection granted to all, through the authorisation of temporary residence in Muslim countries, recognising religious freedom and autonomous community rules).

Thus, the culture of peace through the lens of Islam, more than allowing religious freedom for the most diverse socio-religious groups, also offers security, property and

³¹ It derives from the Arabic root *j-h-d* which means "to strive or exert effort", also originating the word *ijtihad* which represents the effort of intellectual endeavour to present an informed religious opinion on a new issue or problem.

dignity, understanding equal citizenship rights for Muslims and non-Muslims, without any discrimination based on caste, creed or culture.

Christians, too, have given various examples of religious coexistence in conflict situations, for example during the protests in Tahrir Square (Cairo) when Christians held hands to protect Muslims during their prayers. The stories of dialogue, mercy and compassion of Mother Teresa of Calcutta in India; the work of Brother Roger and his companions during the Second World War in welcoming Jews in the village of Taizé³² so that they wouldn't be taken to concentration camps. These and other examples serve to say that "God created us to get to know each other, to co-operate with each other and to live as brothers and sisters who love each other" (Francis *quoted in Vatican*, 2019).

4. Peace education

Devising new strategies for peace often involves reflecting in a "laboratory", looking for new ways and solutions to the constantly evolving problem of violence and conflict. In addition to all the efforts already made, it is necessary to bring formal education and non-formal education closer together, articulating and complementing educational models for greater effectiveness in transforming conflicts.

The *Peace Education Programme* (PEP) came about as a response to research carried out in the 1990s in the Dadaab and Kakuma Refugee Camps (Kenya), with the aim of carrying out a needs assessment and reducing ethical and religious aggression between clans. It started out as an educational programme for primary school children, but soon evolved into a community programme for young people and adults to resolve conflicts peacefully. One of the examples of this was when several PEP students from different ethnic groups created a single clan, making themselves heard through peaceful solutions in the face of rival tribes demanding revenge for past brutality. Not only did the young people stop blindly following the ideas of their elders, but they also became an example of peaceful solutions to the community. Today, this initiative is developed and implemented by various agencies and departments of the United Nations, with an important role for UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation). The main objectives focus on: promoting a culture of peace by encouraging peaceful values, attitudes and behaviour; developing individual and

³² An ecumenical community founded during the Second World War by Brother Roger, it now welcomes thousands of young believers and non-believers every week. This village was just a few kilometres from the Nazi-occupied area of France. Today it also welcomes refugees from a wide range of conflict zones.

collective skills for resolving conflicts peacefully; and ensuring education for all, regardless of their background or socio-economic context.

The structure of the curriculum includes approaches to understanding the concept of positive peace, in which justice and equality are present, as well as negative peace, which only encompasses the absence of conflict. Starting from this point, the programme aims to develop conflict resolution methods such as mediation, negotiation, non-violent communication and the search for a consensus that meets principles such as tolerance, respect, solidarity, empathy and social justice. As for its methodology, PEP uses methods of active student participation in practical actions and discussions or debates in safe spaces of sharing and awareness, using real examples close to their own reality. It also involves students in local community actions, giving greater visibility to strategies of co-operation and hope in the search for sustainable peace. It also develops games and simulations for mediation and conflict resolution and places an important emphasis on art, designing theatre plays and creating musical sets, exploring themes such as peace and human rights. Paulo Freire (1995) points out that, in order to raise awareness of reality, it is necessary to better explore its context, giving the example that students often read texts without contextualising the moment in which the author wrote it and without relating it to current reality, because both the educator and the student "need to overcome the naïve posture and experience a concrete practice of the construction of history" (p. 141). Therefore, for PEP to be more effective, it is necessary to invest in training teachers and educators, stripping away prejudices and stereotypes, so that they can pass on the principles and strategies for peace-building and conflict resolution, raising values such as social justice, solidarity, co-operation and equality.

Lederach's Moral Imagination suggests creating stimuli to explore peaceful strategies for resolving conflicts, and this case is a reflection of that. Thus, peace education "provides an opportunity to develop constructive life skills for children and young people who have experienced or are experiencing war and conflict" (INEE 2005, p.8). Therefore, in order to act simultaneously with the community and the school, PEP seeks to act on three levels of training (basic, intermediate and advanced) aimed at trained teachers and facilitators with no teaching training, responding to children and young people in and out of school by developing constructive tools to deal with problems, minimising the impact of violence on the community.

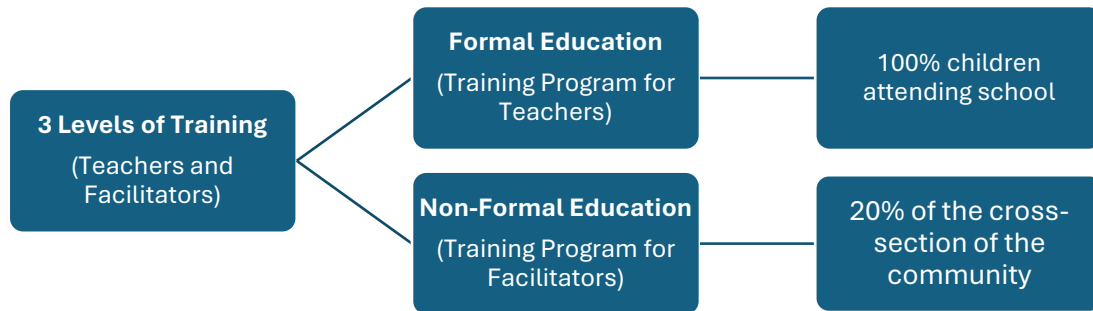


Figure 2 - WBS Training Levels

The basic level introduces children and young people to the fundamental concepts of peace, human rights and conflict resolution, applying these principles to everyday life. The intermediate level aims to go a little deeper into these concepts, leading them to carry out actions in their local communities and school environments. The advanced level aims to train educators, community leaders and professionals in advanced conflict resolution techniques and building a sustainable culture of peace. In short, each level builds a more solid foundation for building a culture of peace, working with various social actors and ensuring that the principles of peace and conflict resolution are integrated into various social spheres.

Thus, formal and non-formal education play a decisive role in building a culture of peace, especially in areas where the continuous cycle of conflict needs to be counteracted, as is the case with education in emergencies. Given the context, it is important to develop bonds of trust and solidarity between teachers/trainers and students/community, making the learning content construct meanings and significations in the construction of structural peace.

Durkheim (2001) characterises education as "the action exercised by the adult generations on those who are not yet mature for social life", with the aim of "arousing and developing in the individual a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral conditions" (p. 6). According to Bourdieu (1988), it is important to consider the cultural reproduction of education, reflecting on the "way in which schools, together with other social institutions, contribute to perpetuating economic and social inequalities throughout the generations", which can have a negative impact on the acquisition of values, attitudes and habits through the hidden curriculum, thus prolonging the cycle of inequality and conflict (quoted in Giddens, 2004, p. 517).

In a situation of prolonged pro-conflict, as is the case in Lebanon, education, in addition to imparting knowledge, also has the role of balancing, adapting and objectively selecting values that contribute to reducing the negative impacts caused by direct violence, developing in each student the maximum excellence they can achieve, as Kant said.

Education in emergencies can thus be understood as a socialisation process that provides quality learning, promoting intellectual, physical, social and personal development for all individuals in situations of conflict, violence, natural and unnatural disasters, forced displacement and public health emergencies (INEE, 2005).

However, its results are not seen in the short term, which means it often takes a back seat, leaving education on the back burner. However, in order to build peaceful, inclusive and prosperous societies, it is essential to "help children and young people reach their full potential, for individual, community and national resilience" (EU Council Europe, 2018, p. 4).

Bearing in mind that, in the long term, quality education is an essential means of building and maintaining peace in a post-conflict territory, the UN has developed strategic *Peacemaking*, *Peacekeeping* and *Peacebuilding* missions. The former UN Secretary General, Boutros-Ghali, understands *peacebuilding* as an action that makes it possible to discover and reinforce structures that strengthen and solidify peace, avoiding new cycles of conflict (Agenda for Peace, 1992). The processes of peacebuilding in a post-conflict territory often result in a very difficult path, as they involve reflecting on the moment before the conflict arose and tackling the causes that led to it, in other words, reopening wounds that have not yet healed.

In the long term, education plays a role in promoting peace and ensuring protection. However, in emergency situations, there are still difficulties in directing economic funds towards the implementation of school practices that develop conflict-sensitive policies, tolerance, citizenship and active responsibility that anticipate or prevent "violence, sexual and gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, association with armed conflicts, as well as the risk of radicalisation leading to extremism" (EU Council, 2018, p. 4).

However, it is important to realise that short-term education protects children from situations of immediate death or various violations of human integrity. As well as building tools for the prevention of hygiene and public health risks, it also contributes to a sense of belonging and normality, reducing the effects of trauma and creating more solid structures for peace-building.

[4.1. Education to prevent violent extremism](#)

Education for the prevention of extremism has proved to be a very important tool for minimising attraction to more radical causes, disarming certain ideologies that lead to violence, through dialogue and the promotion of respect for human rights. It is therefore necessary to anticipate and invest in education in classrooms by reflecting on this issue,

to avoid spending resources on weapons and destructive material that put more children in vulnerable situations deprived of going to school.

We can understand violent extremism as the use of violence to achieve radical and revolutionary ideologies, defending ethnic, religious, social, or political points of view. In recent years, violent extremism has recruited thousands of foreign terrorist fighters, spreading hatred and intolerance. According to a report by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC, 2017), an estimated 30,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 countries have joined extremist groups in conflict zones, particularly in Syria and Iraq.

These situations are often caused by pull factors, fuelling individual motivations and social pressure factors, favouring the growth of this phenomenon (see figure 3), not limited to issues of age, gender, group or community. However, young people are more vulnerable to being lured in because it gives them a purpose in life, a sense of belonging and hope in the face of injustice, inequality and unemployment. It should be borne in mind that extremist groups not only cause terror among the local population, but also hinder humanitarian assistance by disregarding the security enshrined in humanitarian law, resulting in aid workers being killed, kidnapped or injured.

| Drivers for Violent Extremism³³ | |
|--|---|
| Attraction Factors (individual motivations) | Pressure Factors (favourable conditions) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual background (search for identity, adolescent transformations, attraction to violence); - Narratives of victimisation and identification with collective protests; - Misrepresentation of religious beliefs, political ideologies and ethnic and cultural differences; - Attraction to charismatic leaders in the community and social networks. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of socio-economic opportunities; - Marginalisation, injustice and discrimination; - Bad governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law; - Prolonged and unresolved conflicts; - Radicalisation processes in prisons that lead to the legitimisation of violence. |

Figure 3 - Drivers of Violent Extremism

In this sense, religion emerges as a powerful tool, because in times of uncertainty, it gives the individual a purpose, fuelling hope in the face of individual and/or social anomie, through charismatic discourses that often misrepresent the "divine" message. Education

³³ Adapted from the United Nations Secretary-General's Plan of Action for the Prevention of Violent Extremism.

therefore plays a fundamental role, not only in religious reinterpretation, but also because it provides safe spaces for sharing and dialogue.

The *Learning to Live Together* Programme (UNESCO) meets this purpose by focusing on two complementary learning processes: *the discovery of others*, which aims to foster mutual understanding between individuals, and the *experience of shared purposes*, which encourages students to work together towards common goals. In this way, the aim is to create a greater understanding of the history, traditions and spiritual values of "others", as well as to increase the ability to resolve unavoidable conflicts intelligently and peacefully (UNESCO, 2016). This educational programme consists of creating non-oppressive strategies and relevant and timely learning opportunities to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes to build resilience to messages of religious, social and cultural intolerance, as well as the deconstruction of prejudices and stereotypes.

Among other initiatives, *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation*³⁴ (Lebanon) shares this method and has had positive results through interfaith dialogue, creating safe spaces for sharing. Initially, it began by holding sessions to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes among young people, but it soon evolved to include religious leaders from various Christian and Islamic denominations, transforming their discourse at religious ceremonies in favour of a dialogue of peaceful coexistence.

Learning to live together is based on the thinking of Takeyasu Miyamoto³⁵, who believes that by teaching children and young people values of peace, respect and co-operation, it is possible to build a more just and harmonious society and promote positive social transformation. His vision seeks to show that all religions have something valuable to offer for building world peace, and that it is essential to create spaces for intercultural and interreligious dialogue and cooperation. It argues that religious communities can contribute to risk prevention and reduction by raising awareness, changing attitudes, norms and behaviours (Arigatou International, 2019).

The main objectives of the educational programme are to encourage understanding, acceptance and respect for cultural and religious differences, as well as to train young people for effective dialogue and cooperation between individuals from different backgrounds. At the same time, it seeks to transmit values that promote peace, justice

³⁴ The object of study of this research, which aims to carry out an exploratory case study, collecting data using semi-structured interviews, *focus groups*, participant observation and thematic analysis.

³⁵ Japanese spiritual leader of the Buddhist organisation Myochikai and founder of the Arigatou International Foundation (<https://arigatouinternational.org/>).

and inclusion in order to prevent social discrimination and episodes of violence, deconstructing prejudices and pre-established stereotypes. The curriculum is currently divided into four units: Exploring Identity and Diversity; Building Community; Preventing Conflict and Promoting Peace; and Participating in Global Citizenship.

As with *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation*, intercultural and interreligious dialogue activities are promoted between young people from different cultures and religions, in which participants have the opportunity to share experiences and discover the other. Dialogue is like a master key that can open up new paths and strategies for building peace. Paulo Freire (1995) points out that in a pedagogy of conflict, one cannot do without dialogue between the equal and the different who go through the journey in search of social transformation. Education "cannot be done by the power that silences it", because it must follow a systematised education model, seeking more to recreate and reinvent a sustainable society than simply to overthrow power that is hostile to the masses, the result of an education of contestation (p. 93). However, the author warns that dialogue can only take place between equals and differences, but never between antagonists, because in this case, at most there can only be a pact, in which the dominated class accepts the terms of the dominant class, as long as there is a need, because when the situation is no longer justified, the conflict can flare up again. In this sense, it is urgent to reduce or eradicate the "culture of silence" that perpetuates the condition in which the oppressed are systematically underprivileged, marginalised and prevented from expressing themselves, as this can later fuel radical and extremist tendencies, turning inner revolution into collective violence.

During my participation at the *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation* (DLR) sessions in 2017, I was introduced to the pedagogy of the five dialogues by the founder of the initiative. This approach includes: the dialogue of the hands (a pedagogy directed towards cooperation and shared purposes between individuals from different backgrounds), the dialogue of the heart (sharing dignity, understanding the beauty of difference), the dialogue of the mind (the ability to overcome ignorance about the 'other', deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes), the dialogue of holiness (creating community bonds around joint prayer, even while attending to religious diversity), and the dialogue of harmony (the ability to bring together all the previous dialogues in search of peaceful and sustainable coexistence).

Thus, combating violent and religious extremism implies creating dialogue dynamics that direct individuals to develop actions of solidarity and cooperation within their

communities, seeking to contribute to local problems, raising awareness of the beauty of diversity and inclusion. In situations of silent violent threat, it is essential to train young people in the values and skills of peaceful coexistence, so that the oppressed do not later become the oppressors. For Freire (2013), dialogue must be an act of love, humility and faith in others, capable of listening and learning from the other in a genuine way, recognising the importance of each other's experience and knowledge, on a basis of mutual respect and trust. For education to be effective in preventing extremism, it is necessary to move beyond the sphere of "banking education", in which content is deposited in students in a passive way, leaving no room for critical awareness of social reality. Non-formal education is increasingly opening up spaces for dialogical education, which promotes the joint construction of knowledge between students and teachers, who dialogue and reflect on their experiences in the social construction of reality.

The Plan of Action for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (United Nations) states that in order to build a society based on harmony and peace, it is necessary to invest more in high-quality inclusive education, adapting to social and cultural contexts. It is therefore important to implement more educational programmes, whether through formal or non-formal education, providing more learning opportunities in primary and vocational education, encouraging entrepreneurship in the development of small businesses, balancing economic development in a post-conflict territory through job creation and training opportunities based on an idea of global citizenship (UN, 2015).

[4.2. Education for conflict transformation](#)

Education for conflict transformation should explore new creative methods of peaceful coexistence, as the value of peace should not only be promoted "through a problem-solving approach, since the solution to the problem is not necessarily equivalent to peace" (Freire & Lopes, 2008, p. 27). Thus, conflict transformation consists of anticipating and responding to the dynamics of social conflicts, as life opportunities to "create constructive processes of change that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and in social structures", presenting solutions to real problems in human relations (Lederach, 2014, p. 16).

Learning for Peace is a UNICEF programme that links the community to educational programmes promoting sustainable peace, highlighting gender education, providing opportunities for women, advisory roles and conflict mediation. It is increasingly important to increase the role of women in peace-building and inclusion in decision-making, and they can make a significant contribution to conflict transformation. The

Wajir Women's Association for Peace is an example of this, as it reflects how few women have been able to influence conflict transformation in Kenya through the traditional market, having an impact on the whole country. The same happened with the *Association of Peasant Workers of Carare*, where the founder broke the code of silence imposed by the FARC and was important for conflict transformation in Colombia. It is important to provide an education that stimulates a creative imagination, capable of breaking with all that is predetermined and opening up new strategies for resolving conflicts. Moral imagination is the link between reality and transcendence and can lead individuals to places and solutions that have not yet been discovered (Lederach, 2005).

The *Learning for Peace* Programme focuses on the following objectives (UNICEF, 2016, p. 42):

- Increasing the inclusion of peacebuilding education and policies for analysing, implementing and reducing conflicts;
- Increase institutional capacities to provide conflict-sensitive educational services;
- Empowering children, parents, teachers and other individuals to prevent and reduce conflicts and promote peace;
- Increasing access to quality education that is sensitive to conflict contexts and contributes to peace;
- Contribute to the reproduction of knowledge and evidence linking education, conflict and peace-building.

However, it is important to realise the origins of the conflict in order to intervene in an educational and reparative way. According to Lederach (2014), the epicentre of conflict is like a "web of relational patterns" that builds a history of lived episodes, in which new episodes and doubts emerge". If the circumstance releases "conflict energy into the relationship, the epicentre is where the energy is produced" (p. 29).

Lederach (2014), in his *little book of conflict transformation*, suggests that the following points should be encouraged (p. 43-52):

- Developing the ability to see present problems as an opportunity (the ability to see beyond the problems; empathy that allows us to understand the other person's situation, without being influenced by their fears and anxieties; providing ways to solve problems seriously, without demanding quick solutions);

- Developing the ability to integrate various "time periods" (creating strategies that promote a short-term response, but with long-term transformation strategies, always prioritising the emerging needs that underpin change);

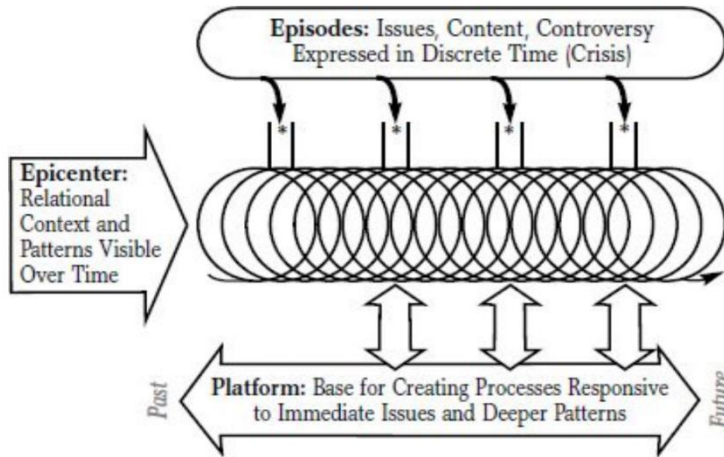


Figure 4 - Epicentre of the Conflict (Lederach, 2014, p. 42)

- Developing the ability to transform the energies of the conflict into dilemmas that can be addressed productively, promoting analysis and positive resolution (recognising underlying energies and developing integrative processes and responses

compatible with the context of the conflict);

- Developing the complex ability to make a friend and not an enemy (living with apparent contradictions and paradoxes is the driving force behind transformation, as complexity suggests multiplicity and simultaneity, creating an optimistic atmosphere in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity);

- Developing the ability to listen to and engage with the cultural identity role (understanding and respecting the identity role is essential for understanding the epicentre of conflict, a group's sense of self and survival).

In "Education as a practice of freedom", Freire (1967) sees education as a means of personal transformation that contributes to social change. In the context of conflict, individual transformation makes it possible to develop values such as empathy, resilience, perseverance and conflict resolution strategies. When these values are developed collectively, the change in social structures and systems that perpetuate inequality and violence tends to diminish and lead the oppressed towards freedom. Thus, Freire (1967) advocates an education aimed at the "man-subject", in which it is possible to develop a critical and liberating consciousness capable of breaking with oppressive structures, treating students as active subjects in the learning process, who are the protagonists of their education and social transformation. The author criticises "man-object" education, which limits students to passive recipients of knowledge, being moulded and controlled by the educational system.

In conflict transformation, the role of a group's identity is fundamental in terms of being able to read where intentions are headed and anticipating the "trigger" that awakens violence. Lederach (2014) emphasises that identity is where the narratives of how individuals see themselves, who they really are, where they came from and what they fear they may become or what they may lose are housed. From this point of view, it is important to develop educational programmes that encourage and support these guidelines for the development of a citizenship marked by peaceful coexistence in societies fragmented by episodes of violence, contradicting the idea that "we only know who we are when we know who we are against" (Huntington, 1993, p.21). It is therefore important to realise that peace education is much more than just a matter of learning. It involves changes in lifestyle, as well as in interactions with others, in search of a commitment to achieving a more just and equitable society. To paraphrase Reardon (1988), the main goal of education is the formation of responsible, committed and caring citizens, capable of living their lives under these values, engaging in critical and creative endeavours for a harmonious transformation of the human condition.

4.3. Oratory of Education and Reconciliation

In *The Night Flight*, Saint-Exupéry reflects the idea that *there is no freedom without direction*, so the road to reconciliation involves reflections and strategies that show us a point of arrival. In this sense, education can occupy a strategic place in building a more balanced society, while prayer, when conducted well, can lead to a more introspective space, reflecting a model of peaceful coexistence in societies fragmented by religious ideologies. Lederach (2005) supports this thought by stating that "where we are going requires us to be located on our own compasses" (p.24), so prayer can play this role of reflection for individuals in search of inner peace, helping them to interpret where they are and where they want to go, transporting this peace outwards. However, the Catechism of the Church (1997) states that it is also necessary to learn to pray, so that in contemplation the events of personal history can be found in the heart, giving it meaning and orientation towards the "economy of salvation" (p.640).

The concept of inner peace emerged in the 14th century with Hesychast practice, giving new meaning to monastic life in the monasteries of St Catherine (Mount Sinai) and Mount Athos (Greece), emphasising the sense of stillness, rest and prayer of the heart. In this way, prayer can act as a vehicle from inner peace to community peace, because the introspection it provides leads not only to questioning trials, but also to reinventing more creative solutions, accepting their condition of fragility and uncertainty. Allah

revealed the message to Mohammed: "Observe prayer, enjoin what is good, forbid what is unlawful and suffer patiently whatever befalls you, for this is steadfastness" (Qur'an, 31 Surah - 17). Inner reflection in troubled times can develop a spirit of solidarity capable of leading to inter-religious dialogue between individuals from different backgrounds. In Christianity, prayer is seen as a path to holy behaviour, i.e. "a way of achieving peace through an inner search based on hesychastic practice or the prayer of the heart" (Correia, 2020, p. 25). Matta El-Meskeen³⁶ gave a new approach to prayer, balancing it in a spiritual economy, which should respect three rules: the *heart* (strengthening the heart by separating the carnal and spiritual worlds, giving more prominence to the *self*), the *sense* (meaning reflected in the imagination and image of experiences, aiming for a higher connection to God) and *others* (manifestation of concern for others, regardless of rivalries or differences, directing the pray-er towards physical and spiritual salvation).

In my experience in refugee camps, it was possible to observe that moments of prayer were highly respected both by Christians towards Muslims and the other way round. The *Giornata della Memoria e dell'Accoglienza*³⁷ has become an example of interfaith community prayer, being celebrated in several official refugee camps, awakening an opportunity for communion and solidarity around peaceful coexistence, regardless of cultural, religious or political differences. The UNHCR Regional Representative (Southern Europe) even says that this approach is important to "rediscover the sense of humanity and solidarity needed to face a phenomenon that affects us all, guaranteeing the right to protection for those in need" (UNHCR website Italy, 2018). In one of the interviews conducted, the parish priest who accompanied the refugees said that it was faith and prayer that sustained the hope of so many refugees and gave them the strength to continue their journey in the face of uncertainty and adversity. Given the importance of the role of prayer, he suggested that the Bari-Palese Asylum Seekers Reception Centre designate two spaces, one as a chapel and the other as a mosque, which quickly became the heart of the entire camp, due to the emerging need for a place of peace and hope in the midst of tribulation.

This whole path can lead the individual towards personal reconciliation, with God and with others, re-establishing "peace and tranquillity of conscience, accompanied by great

³⁶ Matta El-Meskeen, also known as Matthew the Poor, was a Coptic Orthodox monk who gave new meaning to the Coptic monasticism that began in 1969 in Wadi El-Natrun, Egypt (see *Spiritual Economy*, 1998).

³⁷ A commemoration of the shipwreck of 368 migrants in the Mediterranean Sea (3 October 2013) has been established by law in Italy since 2016 to honour all victims from countries in conflict who seek protection in Europe.

spiritual consolation", which is central to rebuilding peace (Catechism of the Church, 1997, p. 381). However, it is important to realise that rather than a philosophy of "forgive and forget", reconciliation must have an action of "remembering and changing" (Lederach, 2005). This practice can be important for a restorative and therapeutic process, bringing individuals closer together in community life, and can represent a turning point in the transformation of conflicts. However, it is necessary to listen to the rhythm of each people or person in this process, avoiding forcing a reconciliation that ends up not being sustainable, because often "quick fixes" are sought and the space for silence and individual inner peace is not respected. Reconciliation requires reflection and preparation, something that can be provided by prayer and education, both on an individual and collective level.

In a study carried out in Lebanon in 1998 on the propensity to forgive, it was concluded that this intention varied according to the level of education, meaning that "any peace education strategy must always involve raising the education of the target population" since this increases their capacity for discernment, broadening their view of the context of the situation and the solution to it (Carmo, 2022, p.9). Thus, education must provide safe learning spaces, developing citizenship values, such as *autonomy* capable of creating a balanced personality capable of playing social roles with coherence and a *solidarity* that is aware of living together in a web of intergenerational and intercultural relationships, guiding their behaviour towards cooperation, peace and empathy, as well as environmental, economic, social and cultural sustainability.

However, in the Lebanese context it is important to work hard on autonomy and solidarity for the *beauty of diversity*, interpreting this opportunity as a potential and not as a problem, because difference can help rebuild a "richer society, knowing how to adapt to change and control it without fear or fascination", building collaborative systems of coexistence (Carmo, 2022, p. 31). Given the religious context, it is important to emphasise that religious confessions have solidarity as a basis for living the faith, with *Zakat* (almsgiving) in Islam standing out as one of the five obligatory pillars for believers, and the works of mercy in Christianity for a holy life. The Catechism of the Church (1997) states that solidarity implies "striving for a more just social order, in which tensions can be better resolved and conflicts can more easily find a negotiated solution" (p. 484). This is important for getting closer to others, developing a sense of empathy that awakens social responsibility for peacebuilding and conflict transformation. More than the absence of violence, peace is the "culture of understanding, inner perception and compassion combined with action" (Hanh quoted in Carmo, 2022, p.36).

In this sense, it is increasingly important to build curricula that develop an education in moral conscience, even though this is often triggered by pain and tribulation. From infancy, "the child awakens to the knowledge and practice of the inner law recognised by the moral conscience" (Catechism of the Church, 1997, p. 456, para.1784). A prudent educational system must teach virtue, discernment and emotional intelligence to the detriment of selfishness, pride, resentment of guilt, feelings of complacency that emerge from human weakness and error, jeopardising the freedom of others. An education for conscience "guarantees freedom and generates peace of heart" (Catechism of the Church, 1997, p. 456, para.1784). From this point, education for dialogue must begin, with the school playing the role of conflict mediator, helping to resolve conflicts towards balanced and mutually satisfactory solutions.

The example of the *Wajir Peace and Development Committee* movement enabled a turning point in the conflict through dialogue. New spaces labelled "zones of respect and mutuality" were created as a result of conscious mediation strategies, bringing about a change in the behaviours and structures that promoted war. This redefined the "relationship, the context and the web of connections" (Lederach, 2005, p. 98). It is in cooperation and dialogue that individuals develop their abilities, moving closer to their personal vocation. Education must therefore stimulate an awareness and creativity capable of redesigning relationships between individuals, enabling them to know themselves in relation to others in favour of peaceful, balanced and fair coexistence.

Conclusion

After looking at various scenarios in peace and conflict studies and the prevention of religious extremism, we can conclude in this chapter that the integration of content for peace education is fundamental to developing sustainable strategies for peaceful coexistence, especially in multicultural societies fragmented by religion, social discrimination, political and economic instability and under silent war threats. Peace education promotes a critical awareness of social reality, mutual respect, knowledge and empathy for the "other", often considered an enemy. It must therefore be understood and applied holistically, addressing not only cognitive issues, but also developing emotional intelligence, capable of deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes, reducing narratives of intolerance and hatred.

In scenarios vulnerable to conflict, the conclusion is that for effective conflict transformation, it is necessary to understand the repressed roots in the social stratum, so that solutions can be found that promote justice and reconciliation, preventing

radicalisation and the rise of religious extremism, often the result of inequality and social exclusion. In this sense, it is important to nurture the oppressed with a conscious and reconciling education, making them the authors of a social transformation in favour of a more just and peaceful society. Reardon (1988) argues that lasting peace depends on the strategy of social structures in the promotion of human dignity and rights, a performance that can be promoted by formal and non-formal schools, drawing a moral imagination among students and the local community, to create new solutions to social injustices and build a culture of sustainable peace.

The next chapter will deal with Lebanon's historical, cultural and religious narratives, introducing the reader to the social construction of the country's identity in constant situations of conflict covered up by faith, which have marked previous and current generations, making them more vulnerable to new conflicts and radical positions, but also with a resilient and persevering identity for conflict transformation.

CHAPTER II

Lebanon: Echoes of History and Current Challenges

1. Lebanon, a historical and cultural portrait

Lebanon is a Middle Eastern country bordering Israel to the south and west and Syria to the north and east, and has earned the title of "Switzerland of the Middle East" and its capital Beirut as the "Paris of the Middle East". These labels were given to the region due to its financial potential, as well as its beautiful landscapes, which include mountains that exceed 3087 metres and historical monuments that depict the Phoenicians, Romans and Arabs, who left their heritage in the region, transforming it into a population rich in religious and cultural diversity.

Unlike most countries in the Middle East, Lebanon stands out as the only nation in the region without a desert. While its neighbours, such as Israel and Syria, contain vast arid landscapes – with the Negev Desert covering much of southern Israel and the Syrian Desert stretching across eastern Syria – Lebanon remains an exception, characterised by its Mediterranean coastline, fertile valleys, and mountainous terrain. This unique geography, resembling an oasis amid the arid expanses of the Middle East, has not only shaped Lebanon's historical and cultural richness but has also contributed to its strategic significance. Throughout history, its abundant natural resources, temperate climate, and prime location have made it a highly coveted land, often drawing the interest of neighbouring powers and external influences.

However, the accentuation of differences has led to various conflicts, but it has also inspired

great thinkers and poets who sought to bridge cultural and religious divides. Among them, Kahlil Gibran, whose works celebrate universal human values, Amine Maalouf, a



Figure 5 - Map of Lebanon

contemporary writer who explores identity, exile, and coexistence in a globalised world, and Charles Malik, one of the key figures involved in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, advocating for fundamental freedoms and intercultural dialogue.

This political system is characterised by a confessional democracy, where religious denominations play a central role in governance. Power is distributed among the main religious groups, ensuring representation in parliament and key state institutions.

The presidency is held by a Maronite Christian, while the position of Prime Minister is reserved for a Sunni Muslim, reflecting a carefully structured balance of power designed to maintain stability in a religiously diverse society. This model is a good example of government coexistence in the Middle East, with the aim of achieving peace and growing between differences rather than condemning them. The idea behind the power-sharing system was to offer guarantees and security to all religious communities, especially Christians.

Lebanon's population is estimated to be around 5.3 million, but no official census has been conducted since 1932 due to political sensitivities regarding the sectarian balance. Demographic estimates suggest that approximately 67.8 per cent of the population is Muslim, while 32.4 per cent identify as Christian. However, these figures remain unofficial and subject to variation depending on the source. These figures exclude all non-Lebanese as refugees or other groups that exceed the proportion of the population at national level, although it is important to note that the number of refugees currently exceeds 40 per cent of the population. The country is divided into six regions (North Lebanon, Mount Lebanon, Beirut, Bekaa, South Lebanon and Nabatiyeh) segmented into twenty-five districts made up of around 900 municipalities with their own local government. The official language is Arabic, although French is widely spoken and there are public schools and universities where French is the official language of instruction.

| Non-Lebanese population in the country | Number of inhabitants |
|---|------------------------------|
| Syrian refugees (registered and unregistered) | 1.500.000 |
| Illegal workers and asylum seekers, Arabs and foreigners (in transit) | 450.000 |
| Palestinian residents since 1948 | 425.000 |
| Syrian workers before the crisis and internally displaced people with their families (not refugees) | 350.000 |
| Displaced Iraqis and Syrians (Christians) from wealthy families | 300.000 |
| Foreign domestic workers | 250.000 |

| | |
|---|---------|
| Non-naturalised and refugee children born without identity | 200.000 |
| Arab and foreign workers who are not Syrians (Egyptians, Sudanese...) | 100.000 |
| Palestinian refugees from Syrian camps (Yarmouk camps, Palestine...) | 100.000 |
| Iraqi refugees from Syria and Iraq | 100.000 |

Figure 6 - Non- lebanese population in Lebanon

Geographically, Lebanon is bathed by the Mediterranean Sea, which is important for trade as well as for the beauty of a coastal country. Its climate is typically Mediterranean, as is its vegetation, and it is also coveted by other Middle Eastern countries due to the fertility of its land for cultivation, unlike the arid deserts of many of these countries. Etymologically, its name comes from the Semitic word *laban*, which means white, most likely due to the snow-capped mountains. Its flag is represented by the cedar, not only for its majestic figure, but also for its strong roots that anchor a long history, as well as the natural perfume often used in ancient times in religious ceremonies, and is still present today on the coat of arms of the Maronite Church. However, it is a tree with little tolerance for shade, so it always seeks the sun, making this species resistant to droughts. The same is true of its people, who have always shown great resistance to adversity. However, throughout their history they have also found it difficult to be in the shadow of another ethno-religious group, resulting in numerous conflicts that have shaped their cultural identity.



Figure 7 - Flag of Lebanon

2. Lebanon, a historical portrait on the stage of war

Lebanon has been the stage for several ancient civilisations, having been at the origin of the Phoenician people, boosting the art of navigation, their commercial culture and the legacy of the writing system. Over time, other actors have appeared on the scene, including Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Ottoman Turks, leaving a legacy of cultural identity that has transformed this region, rich in its ethnic and religious diversity. However, the social construction of this territory was built through invasions, battles and wars, leaving a mark of blood, mistrust and suffering on the country's social and cultural DNA.

From an early stage, Lebanon, along with Syria, became very important in the spread of the Christian faith during the Roman Empire, reaching a significant peak during the 5th

century with the monastic teachings of St Maron³⁸. St Maron's disciples spread this spirituality in the region, initially converting the Phoenicians, who practised religions considered pagan, and became known as Maronites, who soon settled in the mountains, mainly on Mount Lebanon, to escape the religious persecution of the Roman authorities. In this way, an ethnic-Christian identity was gradually built up until the Muslim conquest of the Levant³⁹ between 636 and 644 AD. From then on, Lebanon entered a cycle of conflicts between conquests and reconquests, developing a social system based on the appropriation of power justified on religious grounds.

A few years later (656 and 661 AD) the First Islamic Civil War broke out, caused by the constant Arab attacks and repression of the Christians, leading to a revolt by the Maronites aided by the Byzantine army in 677, solidifying the Christian force on Mount Lebanon. Almost a century later (758 AD) the Sunni Muslims of the Tanukhs clan (Northern Syria) led an army to protect the hills of Beirut (Wadi al-Taym), creating a dividing line between Muslims and Christians, with the support of the Caliph against the Byzantine army. Over the course of almost a century, various tensions arose with the Christians of the Kisrawan region, leading to a new conflict in 845 AD, in which the Sunni Muslim Tanukhs once again imposed their power over the Christians, although there was a great deal of resistance with the support of the Christians of the Akkar area, who were more organised militarily. Given the constant Christian resistance, the Fatimid Shiites from Cairo consolidated their power on Mount Lebanon (980 AD) through yet another conflict, subsequently creating Mediterranean trade relations with the Byzantines, which helped develop the cities of Tripoli and Tyre. This strategy also favoured the increase in population (Maronites, Alawites and Shiites) on Mount Lebanon, beginning to cement a cultural and religious diversity in the region.

In 1021 AD, the Muslims of the Tanukh clan of Mount Lebanon began to follow the Druse Islamic sect founded by the preacher Muhammad ad-Darazi, after the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim was considered the incarnation of Allah. This was due to his political and military abilities, and he was praised after destroying the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Historians say that Caliph al-Hakim was a very unstable and unpredictable person, carrying out various acts of religious persecution against Christians and Jews,

³⁸ A Syrian-Christian hermit monk and founder of the Maronite movement, he is considered to be the father of the Eastern Christian Church with *sui iuris* autonomy, although in communion with the Catholic Church despite their differences in terms of some rituals and festive celebrations.

³⁹ An imprecise geographical location that referred to the region of Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Cyprus, and in some designations could also include Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

repressing women's freedom and, due to his controversial personality, even condemning to death the founder of the sect that considered him a god before the Muslims of the Tanukh Clan.

All these episodes culminated in the arrival of Western Christian forces in 1099 on the Lebanese stage, during what would later be known as the First Crusade. While officially justified by religious motives, this campaign also served as a demonstration of strength, resources, and political power. Despite the grandeur and brutality of the Frankish military strategy to reclaim Christian territories, the crusaders also exhibited a form of Western piety that, at times, surprised both Muslim and Byzantine observers.

Eleven years later, the Franks settled in the territory and overthrew the Muslims of the Tanukh Clan, with new leadership emerging among the Druze. This post-crusade period not only left a mark of the Franks that lasts to this day, but also solidified the trade routes with the Italian crusaders (Venice, Genoa and Pisa) who settled in the Tripoli area. After the Second Crusade, which took place mainly on the Iberian Peninsula, in 1190 the Shiites occupied and controlled southern Lebanon (Jabal Amil), as a result of the Third Crusade in which Saladin reconquered Jerusalem for the Muslims, despite the coordinated efforts of France, England and the Holy Roman Empire. However, in order to achieve peace and coexistence between Christians and Muslims, Saladin granted the right of pilgrimage to the holy sites and the maintenance of the territories reached by the Christians.

After the failure of the Fourth Crusade encouraged by Pope Innocent III, he invited the Maronite Patriarch Jeremiah Amshitti (1215 AD) to take part in the Fourth Lateran Council with the aim of consolidating the Maronite faith in communion with the Catholic Church and cementing Christianity in the Levant⁴⁰. However, Pope Innocent III censured some Maronite beliefs and practices, and the Maronite patriarch acquiesced to the remarks, something that was not well accepted among the faithful, since some were considered heretics after the death of the Maronite Patriarch. Behind the scenes of this rapprochement was also the political and military support of the Christian kingdoms (Hungary and Austria) influenced by the Pope, who encouraged the Fifth Crusade after the failed objectives of the last two (the taking of Jerusalem).

⁴⁰ There was a great need at the time to reaffirm Catholicism in the Middle East, given the Eastern Schism (1054) in which there was a rupture between the Catholic Church based in Rome and the Orthodox Church in Constantinople, with a greater influence in the Middle East through the Byzantine Empire.

Almost twenty years after the Ninth Crusade (1271/72), the Mamluk Sultan Qalawun and the Druze overthrew the Franks and consolidated their hegemony in Tripoli, taking advantage of several civil wars between the Templar Order and the County of Tripoli under Bohemond VII. However, the disagreement among the people was no longer just between Christians and Muslims, and in 1305 the Mamluks⁴¹ went to war with the Alawite Muslims and the Shiites of Kisrawan, expelling them from the region and welcoming the Sunni Turkmen. With the arrival of the Black Plague (1348/49), a third of the population ended up dying in just a few months, causing a reorganisation of communities and greater tolerance from Muslims towards Christians.

For several decades, the Muslim Mamluks dominated the region until the arrival of the Ottoman invasion of Lebanon (1516), having lost their importance, despite the fact that they were both of the Sunni Islamic confession and with roots in present-day Turkey. Those who suffered the greatest human losses were the Druses who supported the Mamluks. The Ottoman Empire put an end to the Christian Byzantine Empire (1453) and maintained its influence until the end of the First World War, based on tax obligations, obedience to military demands, protection for pilgrimages to Mecca and Damascus, and respect for the empire's sovereignty.

The *millet system* was also implemented to promote peaceful coexistence, taking into account the religious diversity in the region, with each religious leader responsible for punishing offences according to the rules of their own religion. Under this system, each believer could profess their religion freely, develop education systems according to their beliefs and communicate freely in their own language. This facilitated not only social and commercial coexistence, but also the formation of alliances regardless of religious origins. One example of this was the union between the Maronites and the Ottomans against Shiite rule in the north and Mount Lebanon in 1764, putting an end to the infighting between the Shihab princes and the Ottoman governors (Harris, 2012). Years later, Bashir II became the governor of the Emirate of Mount Lebanon and was the only Maronite ruler in the region, even though he was born into a Sunni family. Still under his rule, there was a violent revolt by the Maronite peasants against the demand for taxes (1820), inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, reinforced by the Greek War of Independence and reminiscent of the agreement to protect the Maronite Church decreed by Louis XIV (1649). Despite this episode, an alliance was forged between the Maronites

⁴¹ An Egyptian military militia made up of enslaved Turkish soldiers who, after serving the sultans for several years, came to power and formed a Muslim Mamluk dynasty that expanded into various territories, notably Syria and Lebanon.

and Bashir II to expel the Druze (1838). Two years later, the Maronites revolted against their governor, which led to their exile, the expulsion of Egyptian Muslims from the Levant with the support of the British and the start of the First Sectarian War (1860) between the Druze and the Maronites.

Up to this point, it can be seen that the social construction of Lebanon has been made up of conquests and reconquests, invasions and wars encouraged by those in power, without long periods of stability, peace and security. However, the first Lebanese sectarian or civil war marked the conflicts that followed, accentuating this legacy today, perhaps because it emerged from the discontent of the people, more specifically the Maronite peasants, who saw their rights reduced at the hands of their Maronite landlords in the north and the Druze in the south. In the north, they even established a peasant republic supported by the clergy, while in the south, the war resulted in more than 10,000 Maronite deaths and the destruction of hundreds of Christian churches. European intervention was even

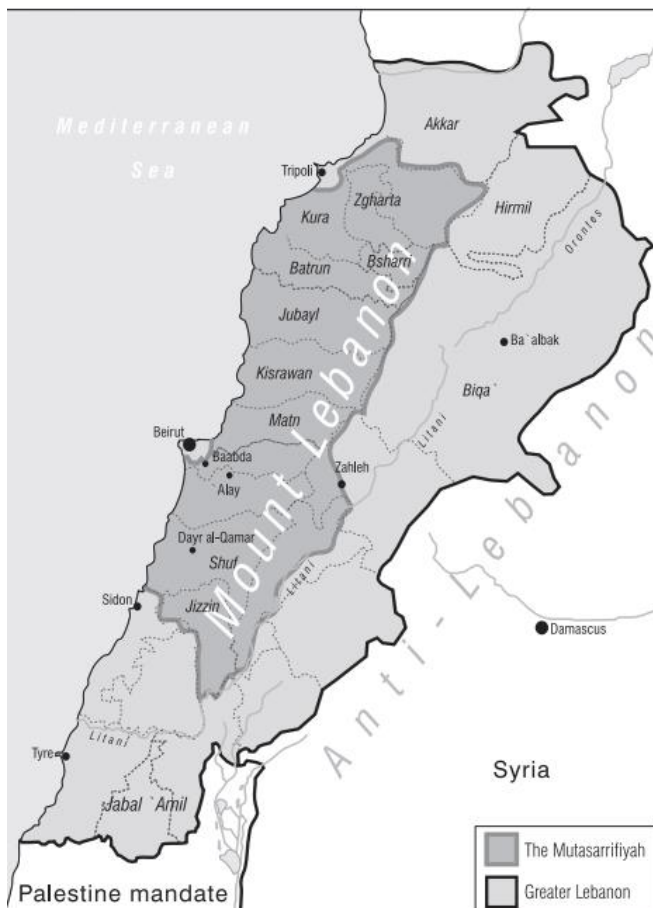


Figure 8 - Map of Lebanon during the Ottoman Empire

necessary because the escalation of events motivated Muslims from the neighbouring country (Syria) to attack the Christian minorities. In addition to these figures, there was also an influx of 20,000 Christian refugees to Beirut, including the victims of the atrocities in Damascus. Under pressure from France and England, the Ottoman authorities tried to restore order by appointing a Christian governor in Lebanon with the agreement of the Sultan and the European powers. This facilitated population growth, making Beirut an important political centre that rivalled Damascus twenty years later (Harris, 2012). At this time, Beirut prospered economically, with Christians controlling banking, insurance, long-distance trade and silk production, while Sunni Muslims dominated

trade in the Eastern Mediterranean. Various infrastructures were built, facilitating trade with Syria and reducing the journey time between Beirut and Damascus. Although there was still some friction between Christians and Muslims, the religious leaders of the neighbourhoods tried to appease tensions. From the end of the Sectarian War until 1890, there was also a strong investment in education, encouraged by the Greek and Maronite churches and supported by French Jesuit missionaries and Anglo-American Protestants. This resulted in the modernisation of Lebanon, developing new ventures and skills in the population, as Protestant education spread to various regions (around 45 schools), where the Druze and other mixed neighbourhoods could take advantage of learning, which until then had been very limited. In addition, the National Secondary School was founded for Muslims and Christians from important families, as well as the University of St Joseph (1881), which taught medicine. With this scenario in place, the Ottoman administration decreed state control of education due to suspicions of private Muslim education, which could be a threat to Arab nationalism. Thus, education at the Ottoman College and the Sultan's School was reinforced in order to give Sunnis and Shiites an important role in Beirut.

Thus, with more sophisticated education, discontent and social revolts soon grew, and in 1908 there was a coup by the Sunni Young Turks against Sultan Abdulamid, who administered the Ottoman Empire at the time. These young people advocated equal citizenship and a centralised Turkish administration, initiating Arab decentralisation movements and opening the door to activists in Beirut, Syria and Iraq. At this time the Lebanese Union party was also created by the reformists, demanding an electoral college for elections in order to stand out or increasingly free themselves from the influence of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, on the basis of the Protocol of December 1912, the political statutes were amended, broadening the electoral base, giving an extra parliamentary seat to the Maronites and another to the Druze. Lebanon's political situation became more fragile, especially with the rise of the Unionists of the Committee of Union and Progress in Istanbul after the Ottoman Empire lost the Balkans and North Africa (1911 to 1913). Meanwhile, the Maronite Patriarchate played a crucial role in Lebanon's independence, being the only religious confession to lead a massive campaign to reclaim the country's sovereignty, resorting to diplomatic activities, international relations, the promotion of education and internal political influence. The figure of Patriarch Elias Hoayek was particularly significant in mobilising support for the Lebanese cause and defending national autonomy.

2.1. New world order between two great wars

With the outbreak of the First World War, the *Great Famine of Mount Lebanon* took place in 1915, resulting in the deaths of around 200,000 people, mostly Maronites, and it also housed refugees who were victims of the Armenian genocide, minimising the population decline. The Christian majority went from 80 per cent to 55 per cent, while the Maronites went from 58 per cent to 33 per cent. In this adjustment, Sunnis went from 3.5 per cent to 20.5 per cent and Shiites from 5.6 per cent to 17.2 per cent (Harris, 2012). In addition, Lebanon became subject to Ottoman military administration, losing its special administrative status granted to Mount Lebanon. Thus, the Maronite Christian governor was replaced by a Turkish Muslim. However, the Ottoman Empire was always careful to differentiate between the government of Mount Lebanon and the government of Syria, always appointing a different governor for each region. As a result, it is understood that Lebanon's independence from Syria

Under his rule, Lebanese nationalist activists were publicly hanged before a court martial, accused of having links to the Allies. During this period, the Ottoman Empire controlled trade, agriculture and livestock, benefiting its needs to succeed in the war and leaving the population increasingly fragile, subject to forced conscription, deportation of Lebanese families, execution of deserters and increased taxes to pay for war damages. This set of events resulted in prostitution to feed families, and there are reports that the hunger was so great that the desperation of the Lebanese led them to feed on dead dogs and camels, as well as practices of cannibalism (Traboulsi, 2007).

What is essential here is to ensure that the Ottoman Empire never mixed the government of Mount Lebanon with that of Syria. It always appointed a different governor for each city. By saying this, we are making it clear that Lebanon is independent and is not and never will be part of Syria.

In 1918, the Ottoman Empire, which was fighting alongside Germany, was defeated in the First World War, leading to the dismemberment of its territory and the restructuring of the Levant and Iraq. The United Kingdom and France agreed that the French would administer Mount Lebanon, the Syrian coast and mark their influence in the Syrian hinterland, while the British would manage the situation in Palestine. Thus was born a new world order marked by European hegemony, colonising new areas of the Middle East. Two years later, France granted new borders to the Lebanese state, extending the territory of the Christians at the request of the Maronites. French hegemony increased the ambition of the Maronites and the humiliation of the Sunnis. In the same year, the

French army expelled Governor Faysal from Damascus, creating the State of Syria and collecting a new colony, which always needed the approval of the newly created League of Nations. To appease the discontent of Sunnis, Shiites, Druze and Orthodox, French officials drew up a multi-community council based on confessional democracy, giving shape to a new Lebanese constitution. In 1919, during the Versailles Peace Conference, the Maronite Patriarch chaired the Lebanese delegation, representing different cultural and religious groups, calling for the independence of "Le Grand Liban", resulting in the current structure of the country. Thus, a new electoral cycle took place in two phases: universal male suffrage and multi-community elections.

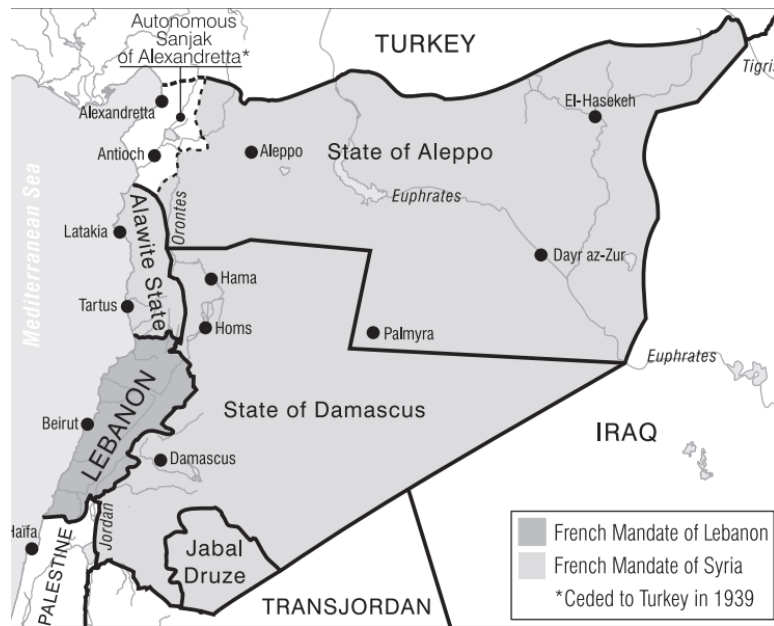


Figure 9 - French Mandate (1920 to 1943)

delegation, representing different cultural and religious groups, calling for the independence of "Le Grand Liban", resulting in the current structure of the country. Thus, a new electoral cycle took place in two phases: universal male suffrage and multi-community elections.

Of the thirty parliamentary seats, seventeen were occupied by Christians and thirteen by Muslims. In this new political system, greater education of the population was necessary, expanding public educational investment in order to counter the tendency to only favour the education of influential Maronite and Sunni families. This resulted in the creation of 134 state schools and one secondary school, numbers that were still a far cry from private education (1335 private basic schools and 69 secondary schools). In addition to an improvement in education, there were also more initiatives in the media by creating several renowned newspapers that informed the population of national and international events. In 1926, the French mandate clarified a legal separation between Sunnis and Shiites, granting the Shiites their judicial institution. The country's economy made a rapid recovery from the Great Depression that had spread to several countries, based on investment in industrial expansion. This led to the return of many Lebanese emigrants with industrial experience, given the difficulties experienced in the countries where they were. Thus, from 1935 onwards, Lebanon had superior infrastructure to many countries, the result of strategic investments by the French mandate in the Port of Beirut.

Also in the 1930s, the relationship between the Maronites and the French deteriorated, leading to co-operation between Sunnis and Maronites, seeking fairer treatment for Muslims, fully supported by the Maronite Patriarch. The famous Bishara al-Khuri (Maronite) and Riyadh al-Sulh (Sunni) joined forces on these issues, seeking independence for the Lebanese mandate, managing the important support of France and the motivations of the Muslim population. Thus, al-Khuri, who would become President of the Republic in 1943, sought an agreement at the end of the 1930s that promised fair sectarian quotas and equality in taxes, as well as the country's independence and membership of the League of Nations within three years. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Druze seized the opportunity to gain more power, since the legitimacy of the French mandate had been lost with the end of the League of Nations. During this period, France had surrendered to Germany and the United Kingdom, fearful of the growth of Nazi influence in the territories it had reached, rallied Commonwealth troops to attack northern Palestine and Iraq, as well as invading Lebanon and Syria, suffering harsh attacks in Beirut and Sidon. At the end of 1941, Churchill sent a representative to meet with Bishara al-Khuri (Maronite), Najib Usayran (Shiite) and Majid Arslan (Druze) to seek solutions while keeping his troops in the country. Between 1941 and 1943, the British oversaw shared leadership between Maronite and Sunni leaders in a pre-independent state through the Lebanese National Pact. In this agreement, the Muslims had to accept the role of Maronite leadership and, in return, the Christians had to accept a partnership in leadership and the realisation that Lebanon was part of the Arab world. Thus, in 1943, the President of the Republic of Maronite origin and the Prime Minister with Sunni roots were officially defined. However, the previous two years had been marked by factional struggles and disputes between the French and the British, as this compromise had only favoured the Christian and Sunni elite, especially after a deregulated post-war economy. With the end of the Second World War, the Lebanese government dismantled control of trade, finance and goods, which were still dominated by the French and British. However, in 1948 there was a new influx of refugees (120,000) from Palestine as a result of the war with Israel.

In the following decade, Beirut became the centre of banking and financial services in the Middle East, due to the value of its currency, the free market and minarchism or minimal state. At this time, Beirut was nicknamed the "Paris of the Middle East", because without state intervention in the market and the revival of the economy, it attracted new companies, consolidating its status as the ideal capital in the Arab world, favouring education and tourism.

However, as happens in many societies with fragile democracies, President al-Khuri also began to question his recognised reputation as the "hero of independence" by trying to hold on to power, and in the face of public opinion and the political class he was forced to resign in 1952 after almost ten years in office. This had an important impact on the people, as it meant that there was still some hope in this confessional democratic system.

2.2. Road to Civil War (1975 - 1990)

The first sign that a long civil war was on the horizon was felt in 1958 in a brief conflict between Maronites and Sunnis, due to the mutual accusation between President Chamoun and the Sunni elite of violating the National Pact. Faced with the Suez War, the Muslims considered it a good time to cut diplomatic relations with France and England, given the rise in popularity of Nasser (Egyptian President) among the Muslims in Lebanon, who was in favour of Arab nationalism. In order to end this conflict, American intervention was needed to control the political class and religious divisions.

The second sign came from the impact of the Arab war in 1967, known as the 6-Day War, in which the State of Israel asserted its military power by defeating neighbouring Arab countries (Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq), triggering military action by the *Fida'iyin* Palestinians⁴² in southern Lebanon, dragging out various tensions and conflicts for years. Israel thus gained a new stage in the Middle East, adding to its territory the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, which belonged to Egypt, the Golan Heights (Syria) and the West Bank (Jordan). Given all the history since the Crusades, more than the imposition of war on the Arab world, the most significant thing was the recovery of the city of Jerusalem due to its religious and historical symbolism.

At this time, Palestinian military bases were set up in the region of Arqub (South Lebanon) with the aim of curbing Shiite intentions and increasing Sunni Palestinian leadership in the region with the support of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation). However, the *Fida'iyin* Palestinians were well received by the population of southern Lebanon, not only for their military resistance to the Arab world, but also as a criticism of the Lebanese army, which was content to defend foreign embassies and oil companies exploited by the Americans and British (Traboulsi, 2007). On the other hand, it should be remembered that a large part of the population in this region was made up of Palestinian refugees, the result of the War of Independence that led to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Despite the existence of these new military bases, the recent war

⁴² Palestinian nationalist militants and soldiers dubbed "freedom fighters" are considered terrorists by the Israeli state.

increased the number of refugee camps in the south for a stateless population who tirelessly kept documents of their belongings in the hope of one day returning home.

Thus, the PLO began to gain influence in the country, setting up headquarters in Beirut, leaving the country more vulnerable to future conflicts, as the country facilitated access for Palestinian fighters against Israel, after these movements were rejected by Iraq, Syria and Jordan in an attempt to reduce the feeling of humiliation caused by the defeat in the 6-Day War. Despite some surveillance by the Lebanese secret services in the south of the country, tensions between Sunnis and Shiites increased, as did misery, mistrust and discontent among the population in general.

With all these ingredients, especially with the opportunity felt by the Muslim nationalist movements to tear up the National Pact, they argued that a new government restructuring was necessary, since the population distribution was unbalanced in the face of the confessional representation of the Maronite President, Sunni Prime Minister and Shiite Speaker of Parliament. With the demand for a new census to justify these changes, the Christian community revolted at the lack of respect for the National Pact and the governmental bases of the state. Let's just say that from here a series of conflicts developed that ruined Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 with different criticisms among academics, as some argue that the "war was not Lebanese because national and international agendas determined its start and course" of events, while others say that it was not a war but a series of conflicts with different objectives, emphasising the role of the militias to the detriment of the discontent of the popular civil movement (Haugbolle, 2012, p.5). Basically, the militias emerged to defend local communities, since the official army was unable to manage all the military actions across the country. Over time, the number of fighters outnumbered the Lebanese soldiers, who were managed by Maronite generals, which led to the desertion of many Muslim soldiers. However, more than a civil war between soldiers and combatants, it was a constant attack on civilians, constituting attacks on human rights, often resulting in the kidnapping of victims, sexual offences and murders with no clear purpose. So it was no longer a question of religious disagreements, but a thirst for power, often resembling small mafias with various interests, particularly economic ones. Of course, this favoured some groups more than others, who used ideological discourses to cover up their greed for the country's economic resources, enhancing the corruption that fuelled and prolonged the war for fifteen years (Zartman, 2005).

In order to better understand how the war paid off, the United States and the Soviet Union financed the conflict according to their geopolitical interests, which manifested

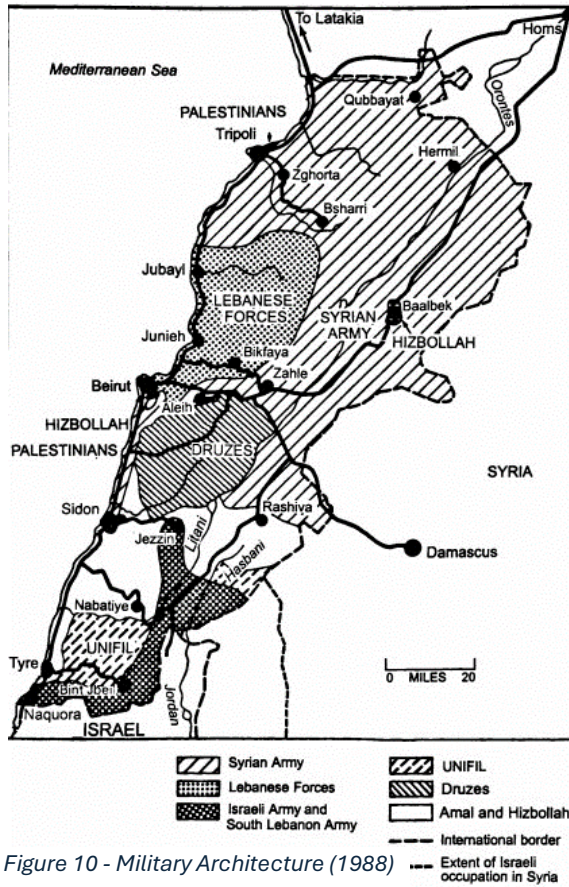


Figure 10 - Military Architecture (1988)

themselves in the rapprochement or retraction of countries like Iran and Israel. The two world powers avoided direct confrontation during the Cold War by indirectly influencing regional conflicts. In the case of Lebanon, the US supported Christian factions and militias, while the USSR favoured groups aligned with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Syrian government (Calandrin, 2022). The *ceasefire* processes resulted in extortion and robbery of the civilian population by the militias, which also resulted in the increased consumption and production of drugs such as hashish, making Lebanon a major international player in smuggling, which also included arms or other types of stolen goods.

From this war, new actors emerged in the political-military field, the best known being Hezbollah, which was born out of a Shiite militia supported by Iran that operated in the south of the country, and today has a great influence in Lebanon, not only because of its representation in parliament, but also because of its interventions in the recent war with Israel and Hamas, without any kind of subservience or orientation on the part of the Lebanese state. Hezbollah became strategic after the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Iran), because its opposition to Israel and the US-backed Christian militias helped Iran expand its influence in the Middle East, counterbalancing the power of Israel and the US in the region.

Apart from the rise of Hezbollah in 1982, what resulted from this war was a continuum of conflicts in the south of the country between the Israel Defence Forces and the Shiite militia for around twenty years, culminating in the victory and affirmation of Hezbollah,

which forced the withdrawal of Israeli forces and the surrender of the South Lebanese Army⁴³ in 2000.

Furthermore, Syria prolonged its occupation of the country until the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri (2005), the victim of a car explosion in the streets of Beirut. In the meantime, this occupation was camouflaged by various political agreements, notably the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination and the Defence and Security Pact, which concluded that Syria would protect Lebanon from external threats, as long as Lebanon was not a threat to Syria. Finally, it was the Treaty of Ta'if (22 October 1989) that brought an end to the Civil War, although it was the subject of some contradictions.

The aim of this agreement was to draw up a document expressing reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. Sixty-two members took part, divided equally between the believers. With the approval of fifty-eight votes, the end of the war and the beginning of reconstruction in the country was dictated, even though conflicts were still raging in the south. A year later, this National Charter of Reconciliation was incorporated into Lebanon's constitution, maintaining the tradition of confessional government, but adjusting the number of deputies in parliament (an extra twenty-nine seats), the transfer of some executive power (the right to dissolve parliament) from the President to the Council of Ministers, and it was divided equally between the religious confessions. Sectarian quotas were abolished in the civil service, the judiciary, the army and the police, except in the general directorates of ministries, which were to rotate and not be reserved for a particular fixed religious confession. The agreement also provided for the disarmament of the militias, which didn't happen, and the role of UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) was hampered. Its objectives were to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, re-establish

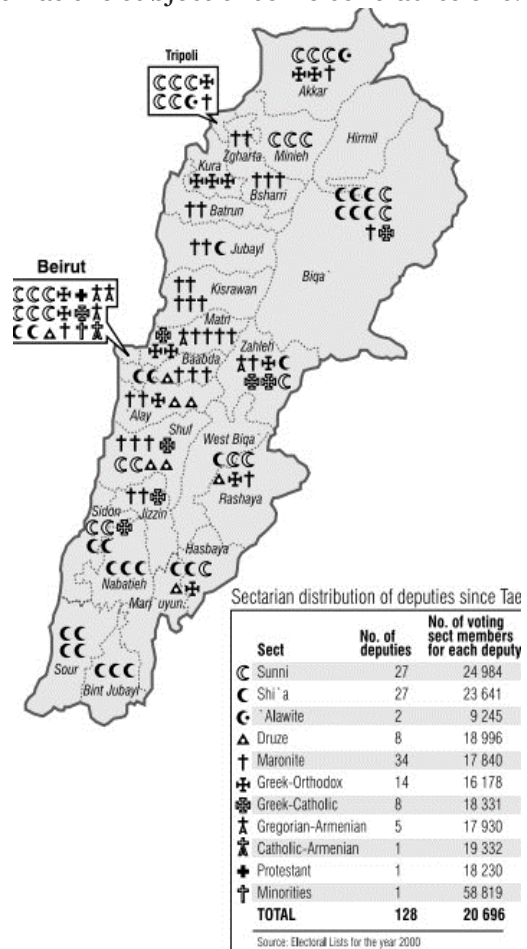


Figure 11 - Sectarian representation (Treaty of Ta'if)

⁴³ Christian militia supported by Israel.

international peace and security and help the Lebanese government regain its authority in the region. It also had various side missions such as preventing smuggling in the country by monitoring the maritime routes that facilitate this illegal process.

In short, it should be borne in mind that this agreement had many unpleasant moments, as the disagreements between the holders of the three main political positions became repetitive and disjointed, making different interpretations of the Treaty of Ta'if, given the ambiguity of the document. However, this time they had the President of Syria as a mediator in resolving conflicts, even though his personal agenda had other ambitions, controlling various sectors, including freedom of the press (Traboulsi, 2007). It should be borne in mind that during the 15 years of civil war, several invasions and external wars were camouflaged, labelling this period the Civil War. In fact, as early as 1976, Syria entered Lebanon with the aim of restoring peace, masking its interests in maintaining its influence in the country by diminishing the strength of the Maronite Christians and other groups that unbalanced its power. After the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan in 1970, this Palestinian group settled in southern Lebanon, creating some tensions in the region with Christian militias, and later targeting Israel, contributing to the deterioration of the territory and the escalation of the ongoing civil war. In 1982, tensions between Israel and Lebanon took on new proportions, resulting in the Israeli invasion of the region, creating a security zone in the south of the country against the PLO, controlled by Israeli militias. During this period, massacres and intense fighting broke out, exacerbating regional and internal tensions.

More than the historical contextualisation of the Civil War, what matters here are the memories that were reconstructed in a society so fragile and fragmented by ideologies, that despite the disagreements always sought a form of peaceful coexistence. The book *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Haugbolle, 2012) states that the feeling of the Lebanese in the post-war period was that life was on hold, because even though peace had been declared, they were still in a state of mistrust, fear and insecurity, because the Ta'if Treaty was proving to be increasingly fragile, as it didn't offer much in the way of solutions to the disputes that led to the war, especially with regard to the limits of the Syrian occupation and the fate of the Palestinian refugee camps, which were under constant Israeli threat. Thus, the state's priority was economic recovery, minimising the importance of ethical issues such as humanitarian crimes and the social approach of justice, peace and reconciliation as a way of avoiding new conflicts. Thus, talking about the war became such a taboo that, over time, some intellectuals began to call on the nation to address the issue in the public sphere, as they believed that the costs of talking

about the truth and reconciliation would have benefits later on, avoiding unresolved historical processes that would serve as a fuse for future conflicts. Of course, reopening wounds that haven't completely healed is not an easy process, not least because if it's handled badly, it could reignite the discord that led to fifteen years of war, prolonging the feeling of estrangement between the various sectors. In the meantime, it was important to reflect on the reasons that fuelled the war, namely smuggling and the benefits that some elites and militias enjoyed from foreign funding. On the other hand, it was also necessary to deconstruct ideological and religious prejudices and stereotypes in order to realise that the incompatibility of peaceful coexistence did not stem from religious differences, but from the ambition of certain groups to rise to power through greed and/or greed. It is increasingly recognised that open dialogue is a prerequisite for collective and individual reconciliation, as well as for building new foundations for a more credible political and democratic culture (Haugbolle, 2012). Of course, holding these debates brought influential people such as politicians or militias to the centre of the issue, running the risk of being judged or sanctioned in some way, so it was not convenient to go down that road. In the meantime, it was necessary to restore the sense of justice of the citizens who had suffered from the war, allowing the country to have the capacity to recognise, accept and put an end to this past, otherwise it risked not being able to justify to the people the meaning attributed to the war. To a certain extent, the population knew that it had been a sectarian war, but they were not satisfied with the fact that there were many war criminals without any sanctions and some of them sitting in parliament. At the same time, this uncoordinated presence in power also meant an effort to implement and rebuild peace, plunging the population into a dilemma that numbed their sense of injustice, producing a civil peace linked to collective oblivion that soon became the target of criticism.

The most worrying thing was the message that was being passed on to the younger generations, as this not only helped to keep traumatic experiences at bay, especially for those who had memories of guilt and suffering, but also silenced the history of a generation that would be the future of the country, leaving them with a feeling of alienation embedded in an amnesiac society, which, by not knowing the past, would be more vulnerable to repeating the same mistakes. The psychological foundations of social memory explain that there are three anchors that fix events in the mind: *affect* (emotional trigger that etches a memory in the mind, separating it from the trivialities of everyday life) the *symbol* (contextualisation and narration of that memory by framing it and assigning it a personal or collective meaning) and *trauma* (develops in situations

where affect overcomes the emotional weight, allowing the individual to apprehend an event by framing it in their personal narrative in the form of symbols) (Assmann *cited in* Haugbolle, 2012). In the absence of these symbols, it becomes difficult to unite and recognise the meaning that the war had, constructing memories as simple feelings of nostalgia, contributing to the suspension of incomplete traumatic processes, inducing people to forget or to selective memories. It would be important to understand the themes and their approaches in school history books in order to realise what kind of generation was created from this context.

Anthropologist Michel Agier (2002) distinguishes three stages in individual and collective reconstruction, characterising them as the *moment of destruction* (awareness of what has been lost, from property to moral and bodily losses); the *moment of confinement* (waiting for a transformation or change that never seems to happen) and the *moment of action* (despite instability and uncertainty, the need to rekindle justice and dignity is reborn, creating mechanisms to express their testimony in the hope that this will change their current situation). From this point of view, a revolution was on the horizon that proved to be peaceful, but new conflicts arose shortly afterwards.

2.3. From the Cedar Revolution to the 34-Day War

The assassination of Prime Minister Hariri (2005) was the spark that was needed for the Lebanese population to start demonstrating and rising up against everything that seemed to be lying dormant. Faced with this scenario, the French President (Jacques Chirac) encouraged the US President (George Bush) to expel the Syrians from Lebanon and weaken Bashar al-Assad's regime. Initially, several demonstrations began to emerge expressing the popular will to no longer be under the thumb of the Syrian armed forces, with tens of thousands of Lebanese gathering in the streets of Beirut and other cities, regardless of their religious or ideological origins, as even Hezbollah militants supported them and were present. Thus was born the Cedar Revolution, a non-violent protest that resulted in the resignation of the pro-Syrian government two weeks later, without bloodshed in the Arab world. In this sense, the words most expressed in the demonstrations (*freedom, sovereignty and independence; truth, freedom and national unity*) gained another meaning in popular memory, mainly because it was possible to understand that social transformation can occur through dialogue and non-violent demonstrations, avoiding the pain and suffering caused by war. This also gave rise to a coalition (March 14 Alliance) of various parties from different sectarian and secular ideologies, as well as independent organisations with political influence, who put their

agendas aside to defend a common goal: the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. However, this movement was met with strong resistance from Hezbollah and pro-Syrian factions, who, encouraged and supported by Hezbollah, actively opposed the departure of Syrian troops. In a controversial and widely criticised move, these groups organised demonstrations calling for the Syrian army to remain in Lebanon and even blocked key highways to prevent its withdrawal. This episode exposed deep political and sectarian divisions within Lebanese society, as some factions viewed the Syrian presence as an occupation, while others considered it a strategic necessity.

Meanwhile, after about a year, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers because they had received information that the Israeli Defence Forces were preparing to attack Hezbollah's military bases as a way of weakening its power, a strategy that seemed to unite the US and Israel in a common goal, given that the Americans were leading the war in Iraq, but considered Iran a threat to their security, just as it was for Israel. Thus, weakening Hezbollah could be the key to Israeli and American objectives, although this strategy has been denied by the countries concerned.

Harel & Issacharoff (2008) believe that the war did not begin on 12 July 2006 after this incident, but rather in a continuum of tensions between Hezbollah and the IDF after Israel's decision to withdraw from South Lebanon in May 2000, because during this period the IDF maintained its efforts to stop Palestinian terrorist attacks in the territories occupied by Israel, leaving Hezbollah always on the lookout. At the same time, Israel was no longer the military actor of the 6-Day War in which it humiliated several Arab countries but now had Hezbollah as a worthy adversary with a winning strategy that envied many Arab countries. However, Hezbollah's strategy was to change the national and international focus, as it was subjected to an unprecedented interrogation of its army, as it was suspected that this armed group had been involved in the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri.

Thus, for five weeks, Hezbollah engaged in various hostilities, and Israel responded with aerial bombardments and ground attacks, causing around a thousand deaths in the Shiite regions of Lebanon. Hezbollah proved to be a competent adversary, firing missiles at Israel until the ceasefire, but its pride covered up its losses and its publicity organs hailed a "divine victory" (Harris, 2012). In the meantime, Hezbollah came under scrutiny, as the non-Shiite Lebanese condemned the initiative of fighting Israel without the approval of the Lebanese government, and parliament voted to end the private armies with the support of UN resolution 1701. As a political party, Hezbollah has maintained the support

of the Shiites and has received new armaments from Syria and Iran, plunging the Lebanese army into an inertia incapable of challenging the party. As a result, UN Security Council resolution 1701 recommended an end to hostilities between the two military actors in the war, calling on Israel to withdraw all soldiers from Lebanese territory. In addition to demanding the release of the two kidnapped Israeli soldiers, it also sent 15,000 UN troops to support the Lebanese army and reinforce UNIFIL, which had been mediating the conflicts in the country since 1978. Three months after the end of the conflicts, a project was developed with the UN to create a tribunal to try the case of Hariri's assassination with international and Lebanese representation. The government and parliament approved the protocol using their two-thirds quorum, as Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian ministers resigned claiming that the government was illegitimate. With this action came new tensions in the streets, assassinations of three more MPs and constant threats from Bashar al-Assad in Lebanon, putting the Lebanese prime minister on edge. Against this backdrop, the UN Security Council bypassed the Lebanese parliament and created the Special Tribunal for Lebanon unilaterally in 2007. Meanwhile, as the court investigation escalated, the assassinations took on another dimension with countless car bombs ending the lives of influential people in the Hariri investigation, especially after Suleiman, a former army commander, was elected president. In 2011, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon indicted Hezbollah members for Hariri's assassination, and only in August 2020 was Salim Ayyash sentenced to life imprisonment as co-author of the car bombing, which in addition to killing the prime minister, caused another 21 deaths and more than two hundred injuries. While it is impossible to establish a direct link between the motivations that led to Hariri's assassination, it was pointed out in court that in the months leading up to the explosion, the prime minister had been advocating reducing the influence of Syria and Hezbollah in the country, as their actions were not being beneficial to reconstruction and peacekeeping.

Although the people may have felt that justice had been done, deep down they know that the story is not complete, because given the rigour of Hezbollah's obedience structure, it would not allow an action of this calibre without its authorisation. However, Syria also had an interest in this matter, but it would be difficult for a member of Hezbollah to act in favour of Syria without the agreement of his superiors in the Shiite militia/group/political party.

3. The Arab Spring and the impact of the Syrian Revolution

At the end of 2010, a wave of protests and demonstrations began in several Middle Eastern countries against the government regimes they were under, with the aim of letting the international community know about the repressions they were subjected to. It all started with a young Tunisian who set fire to himself in an act of protest and despair, leading to his death. Against this backdrop, the population did not remain silent and took to the streets to protest against the conditions in which they lived, leading to the flight of the president who had been in power for twenty-three years. The situation escalated with the help of social media, spreading the movement to several Middle Eastern countries, leading to the ouster of several presidents and civil wars in Libya and Syria.

Obviously, this wave of protests also had an influence in Lebanon, calling for a reform of the political system, because the young people who demonstrated in various Lebanese cities for almost a year no longer saw themselves in this system of governmental confessionalism, given the constant corruption. Other significant protests arose from the initiative of the 14 March Alliance calling for the disarmament of Hezbollah and the revival of the values of the Cedar Revolution. Meanwhile, the unpredictability of the civil war in Syria left the Lebanese in a position of alertness, but at the same time in solidarity with the refugees arriving in the north of the country. There was a controversial feeling in the minds of the Lebanese, because recent knowledge of the suffering caused by the war meant that it was almost morally obligatory to welcome and care for Syrian refugees but given the recent occupation of Syria in the country, the Lebanese wanted them to leave quickly as soon as the war was over. Thus, with Syrian refugees to the north and Palestinian refugees to the south, Lebanon was experiencing enormous economic instability, given its fragile politics with various private and public agendas trying to recover a post-war country with sectarian and generational divisions.

However, being on the border where religious extremism was gaining another stage through the Islamic State in Syria, the Lebanese alert would have to be fought on two fronts, not only in a preventive matter of territorial combat, in which Hezbollah saw yet another opportunity to justify its military power, but also on the border of the mind, as the discontent of the younger generation made them an easy target for the military grooming of extremist ideologies. However, it was difficult to offer quality education to refugees and Lebanese in public schools, as the country's economic situation did not favour the necessary conditions for teachers. What's more, it was very difficult to bring Lebanese and Syrians together in a classroom without episodes of violence, because the

rivalry between the two was enormous, not only because of the Syrian occupation, but also because of the prejudices built up by their families, which had repercussions on the young students when they were confronted with this reality. So the solution was to teach the Lebanese in the mornings and the Syrians in the afternoons at times that were not suited to the needs involved, which was not enough to strengthen the child protection system, which was left at the mercy of various NGOs and humanitarian agencies. It was during this period (2010) that *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation* (the subject of this research) emerged. Rather than offering school syllabuses of scientific knowledge, it dedicated itself to a process that could be significant in anticipating new wars, through interethnic and interreligious dialogue sessions among young people, with the aim of deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes and minimising the impact of radical discourses as reasons for conflicts and wars.

3.1. From the Economic Crisis to the Beirut Port Explosion

With the Syrian Civil War still ongoing and the covid-19 pandemic worsening, Lebanon has plunged into a huge economic crisis, jeopardising the essentials of everyone living in the country. The idea of pegging the Lebanese pound to the dollar was one of the strategies to minimise the damage caused by the Civil War, both currencies being in flux. Another strategy was to reinvest in tourism to bring the country it once was out of the shadows, showing new indicators of safety for travelling and visiting, making the most of its hospitality facilities and historic landscape. In order to reduce public debt, the country also made use of the property market and remittances from the Lebanese diaspora, which, as new money flowed into Lebanese banks, seemed to rebalance the balance of trade, overshadowing the corrupt circulation of money.

However, as time went by, it was realised that the result was not living up to expectations, as the diasporas were increasingly reducing the transfer of money to their relatives, until from 2016 onwards the bank management entered a climate of desperation, ending up exchanging public debt for *Eurobonds*⁴⁴ equivalent to two billion dollars, delaying a liquidity crisis, which was later confirmed as it became increasingly difficult to attract external funding. Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, banks began to prevent their customers from moving money illegally, opening the door to a parallel economy in the country, shrouded in black market transactions and new methods of corruption. Hundreds of businesses closed their doors, causing the loss of thousands of jobs,

⁴⁴ Issuing debt in a currency other than the country's own, facilitating the management of public debt by a single entity.

increasing school drop-outs and extreme poverty, and it was considered the biggest economic crisis in decades. As if that wasn't enough, the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic made the whole situation worse, further weakening human rights, because if child trafficking or "child renting"⁴⁵ was very common before, the situation now jeopardised many moral factors, despite all the restrictions that the pandemic brought. At this time, the Lebanese pound devalued by more than 90 per cent, putting around 80 per cent of Lebanese below the poverty line, lacking essential goods such as bread, water and medicines. Amartya Sen said that freedom is made up of choices, but those who can't choose what to eat don't have the freedom to feed themselves, which raises a serious problem of violation of freedom, since food should be a guaranteed right. The Nobel laureate in Economics (1998), who carried out various studies to combat poverty, sarcastically criticised society, saying that, more than the misery and suffering of the poor, poverty is a nuisance for the rich, not only because of its visibility, but also as a reflection of their decisions on the social economy (Sen, 1982). This view reflects the poor decisions of Lebanese politicians, dragging yet another generation into the perpetuation of the cycle of poverty, with no great prospects for the future, since Euronews reports that even those who want to leave the country are prevented from leaving because the General Security Agency lacks the money to issue passports. In this sense, hunger is more than a question of material well-being, as states have an obligation to create social policies that guarantee food security and reduce extreme poverty, which jeopardises values such as freedom and justice (Sen, 1997).

Considering two years of financial default by the Lebanese state, the IMF has said that it will not support the country again until there is some capital control, as the United Nations warns that cases of impunity, corruption and structural inequality could lead to the failure of Lebanon's state structure. In practical terms, the perception of reality between politicians and the Lebanese people is becoming more and more distant, since the difficulties and daily challenges between the two are very different, placing the situation of Syrian and Palestinian refugees on an even more serious level, who already live on the margins of society, and now see their lives as an interminable wait with no safe course to follow.

Faced with this situation, the Lebanese people once again took to the streets to show their discontent in a more violent way, attempting to storm Parliament, throwing various

⁴⁵ According to the accounts of some people in the Akkar region, since the end of the Civil War, it was common for people with great economic power to come to a family in difficulty and "rent out" their young children for a certain period of time to beg for money on the streets, sell CDs or other activities.

objects at the security forces and vandalising banks, shops and public property, resulting in 460 people being injured. In recent demonstrations, although there have been some religious representations, the focus has increasingly been on a fight against the excessive ambition for power, putting aside ethnic-religious differences. I believe that the last few years of inter-religious dialogues between young people through NGOs such as *dlr* or *adyan* have raised individual and collective awareness, lifting the veil from the root of the problems that until then were covered up by the exclusivity of religious discourses.

A few months after these rounds of demonstrations, the explosion at the Port of Beirut (4 August 2020) further aggravated the socio-economic crisis, insecurity and the feeling of fear. The explosion took place in a warehouse storing ammonium nitrate and was heard in Cyprus (240 kilometres away) and felt like an earthquake in Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Israel. The reasons behind the incident have never been made clear, with the only justification being that the situation occurred due to a lack of security measures in the storage of 6,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate confiscated by the Lebanese authorities from an old ship that had been abandoned for six years, and which had been dumped with bags of fireworks nearby. Having failed to fully convince the population, the UN Secretary General called for a credible and transparent investigation, with the aim of restoring confidence to the Lebanese people and holding the perpetrators of this catastrophe accountable. The explosion exacerbated the food crisis by destroying the largest grain warehouse, caused the deaths of almost two hundred people, injured thousands, and left three hundred thousand homeless, prompting the Lebanese government to declare a state of emergency for a fortnight. Considered the third-largest non-nuclear explosion in history, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the blast had devastating consequences, not only in terms of human casualties but also in further deepening Lebanon's ongoing economic and political crisis.

Without much news, the Lebanese once again took to the streets for another wave of protests against the government and its inability to anticipate disasters of this nature, leading to the resignation of the prime minister and his government a few days later. Against a backdrop of existing tensions, economic difficulties, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Syrian refugee crisis and a catastrophic explosion, the UN decided to support the country with 6 million dollars from the Central Emergency Response Fund and 9 million dollars for the repair of buildings, logistics operations and support for the health system under the care of the UN's humanitarian coordination in the country. This support rekindled solidarity, starting a process of mutual help in rebuilding homes and relieving suffering, with numerous young volunteers standing out, in which the young people of

DLR were also present, creating dynamics of fundraising, physical reconstruction of homes and psychosocial support.

After an interim government, a new government was formed in May 2022 without a convincing majority from the main political blocs and without the ability to elect a new president after twelve voting periods. Against this backdrop, the European Parliament met in July 2023 to discuss a resolution for the situation in Lebanon. Among the various snowballing considerations was the inability to reform the system of governance, which has sustained a political impasse that has given rise to a socio-economic political crisis, fuelled by neo-liberal economic policies that have been fuelled by corruption and have dragged thousands of Lebanese below the poverty line.

There was also concern about the violation of basic human rights, such as the lack of medicines and health professionals, which, due to insecurity and abrupt wage cuts, led to their emigration. The successive waves of privatisation and market deregulation have also not been beneficial to economic recovery or to meeting international financial commitments. In addition to fuelling violent protests, it has also emerged that Lebanon is one of the countries with the highest rate of inequality in the world, with 10% of the population owning 70% of the country's wealth. This expresses enormous concern about the levels of corruption, with the current prime minister (Mikati) under investigation for suspected money laundering and links to the Pandora Papers.

Another major concern is that there is still no one held accountable for the Beirut harbour explosion, as Hezbollah and its allies have systematically blocked investigations, further eroding trust in Lebanon's confessional political system. The judicial process has been repeatedly obstructed, with even the second-in-command of Hezbollah attacking the Justice Palace and openly threatening judges. This deliberate interference highlights how political actors aligned with Hezbollah have actively boycotted legal proceedings to protect their own interests, reinforcing public frustration and deepening the crisis of governance in the country. Also noteworthy in this context is the attack on press freedom, resulting in the unjustified detention of journalists who were carrying out various investigations into the corrupt system, as well as the detention of members of the LGBTI community who are subjected to inhumane treatment in police stations. With the civil war in Syria still ongoing, it is estimated that more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees reside in the country in inhumane conditions, many of whom are being irregularly deported by the Lebanese authorities, who are also blocking the entry of new asylum seekers through security checks at the country's borders. The country currently has twelve huge refugee

campus, one of which houses around half of the 250,000 Palestinian refugees, who are regularly discriminated against because they don't formally have citizenship of any state, are prevented from accessing certain professions or owning property. This is compounded by the fact that Israel has continued to systematically intimidate the Lebanese population since the end of the 2006 war, carrying out various military exercises and launching several air strikes in the south of the country, the most recent being on 7 April 2023, not to mention the current onslaughts caused by the conflict with Hamas. It should also be emphasised that Israel has never been able to vacate the Lebanese territory of Shebaa since 1967, one of the reasons why UNIFIL was created in the country and has had no success in mediating. Finally, it should be remembered that Lebanon has been receiving support from the European Union since 2011, totalling around 2.77 billion euros in financial aid, technical assistance and humanitarian aid, as a result of the Association Agreement signed in 2006.

Meanwhile, the European Union has been attentive to the continuing unstable situation in the country, stating that it supports the EU's calls for change and expressing solidarity with the resilience of a people who, even in the face of endless crises, continue to provide various services such as education, health and social assistance. Nevertheless, they reiterate their concern to counter the corrupt system, as well as to elect a government that can respond to the needs of the people. On the other hand, they point out that the Lebanese must be authors of their own history, moving away from foreign interference in the country's internal affairs, as they believe that between occupations and external support they have played a role in Lebanon's decline, namely the adoption of solutions under the measures of some international financial institutions. It also advises implementing a tax system that guarantees the principle of progressivity and combats tax evasion in all instances, as well as promoting sustainable solutions to reduce food insecurity by supporting farmers and encouraging local food production; and minimising energy dependence through renewable energy production infrastructure.

As far as the social sphere is concerned, it emphasises the importance of creating safe spaces for activists and human rights defenders, warning of the danger of actions to deport Syrian refugees, as well as the increase in public discourse against refugees, which could lead to new fractions and conflicts. For these measures, the EU will increase financial and humanitarian support to reduce the difficulties experienced. It also emphasises the importance of repealing the law that disenfranchises LGBTI people, as well as laws that prevent Palestinians from enjoying the same rights as other foreign individuals. Regarding justice, it proposes an independent investigation to hold the

Beirut Port explosion accountable, as the successive obstacles placed in the way of the investigation, namely the intimidation and dismissal of the judge in charge by some politicians, has made this situation untenable. In the same way, it would be important to use this system to combat other corruption scenarios, as the coercion of investigators prevents those responsible and solutions from being found.

In this July 2023 resolution, the EU called for Israel's immediate and unconditional withdrawal from the Sheba Estates and other territories it has occupied since 1967, as the neighbouring country has been reluctant to return these sites. Currently, with the incursion against Hamas attacks (October 2023), the scenario has become more sombre, because not only have there already been exchanges of attacks between Israel and Hezbollah, but the panorama of insecurity and disquiet has awoken the population to the possibility of yet another war, further aggravating their fragile situation. Meanwhile, the Lebanese Prime Minister (Mikati) is warning against the escalation of a regional conflict, considering that Hezbollah is managing the situation reasonably and sensibly to prevent the country from plunging into war. Meanwhile, at the beginning of November 2023, Hamas and Hezbollah, rival Muslim groups (Sunni and Shia), met to coordinate attacks on Israel in the Gaza Strip. Against this backdrop, it would be hard not to include Lebanon in this war, although it should be noted that it will not be the only country in the Middle East to act. Predicting a theatre of war, the Lebanese economy minister (Amin Salam) warned that the country only has reserves of food, medicine and fuel for a maximum of three months, and is already developing a contingency plan in case the country actually enters the conflict through Hezbollah incursions. For now, the plan is to increase security at the airport, main roads and sea routes so that basic goods can continue to be imported to help the Lebanese.

4. Freedom of Conscience in the Religious Puzzle

Lebanon is one of the countries with the greatest expression of religious diversity, yet only eighteen are recognised as religious confessions, divided between twelve Christian confessions, five Muslims and Israeli Jews. Since no official censuses have been carried out since 1932, in order not to further damage political representation based on government confessionalism, we can only speak of estimates collected through the CIA World Factbook (2020).

As already mentioned, it is estimated that 67.8 per cent of the population is Muslim, of which 31.9 per cent are Sunni, 31.2 per cent Shia, 4.5 per cent Druze and small groups of Alawites and Ismailis. In the Christian section there are 32.4%, of which just over half

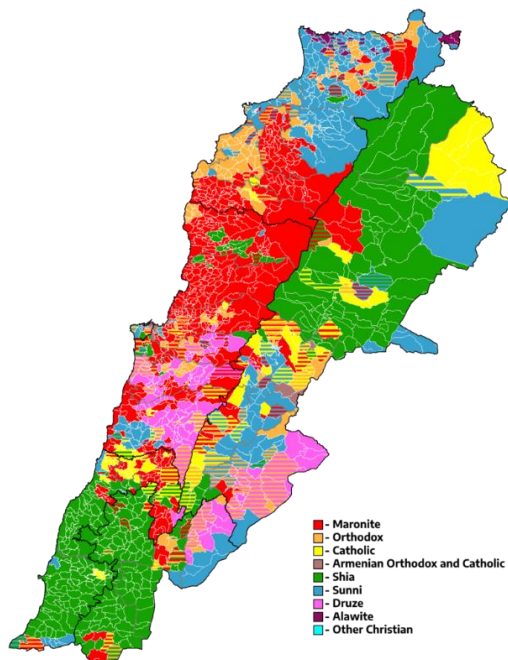


Figure 12 -- Distribution of religious groups in Lebanese territory

are Maronites, a quarter are Greek Orthodox and the rest are divided between Melkite Greek Catholics, Protestants, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Eastern Assyrians, Syrian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics, Copts, Roman Catholics and Syrian Catholics. There are still a small number of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists and Hindus.

As far as their organisation is concerned, the Lebanese Constitution provides for "absolute freedom of conscience", and they are obliged to honour their status and the personal and collective interests of each religious group equally without discrimination, as long as

there is no disturbance to public order. Conversion to a different religious confession is provided for in the law, as long as the religious leader approves, issuing a document of the new religion that must be presented to the Directorate of Personal Status of the Ministry of the Interior, in order to update the personal data in the civil registry. The press is regulated by the government, which controls the publication of religious content that could be considered blasphemous or sectarian provocation, and can lead to maximum prison sentences of one year for public blasphemy against God. Similarly, television content and some websites are supervised by the government, as is the publication of books, magazines or newspapers, which can result in fines or prison sentences if the content is classified as insulting religious beliefs or fuelling sectarian conflicts.

Religious groups recognised by the government have tax-exempt status, the right to apply religious codes, such as regulating family and personal status, which includes performing marriages, divorces, child custody and allowing heirs to inherit according to the values of their creed. Groups such as Shiites, Sunnis, Druze and Christians have their own courts appointed and subsidised by the state and are obliged to comply with certain laws in the constitution, but they have a huge margin in their procedures and decision-making.

Interfaith marriage is possible in government-recognised churches or mosques, provided that the non-believer gives up certain rights such as inheritance or custody of children (in the event of divorce) and is obliged to educate future children in the religion that consecrated the marriage, according to the guidelines of certain clerics or religious courts. Meanwhile, unrecognised religions can own property and perform their religious rites freely, but they have no legitimacy to perform marriages, divorces and inheritance issues, nor do they have political representation.

Recognised religious communities are free to run their schools, but they must respect a set of rules similar to those for public education, which anticipate scenarios of sectarian discord, hate speech and threats to national security. Religious education is permitted by the Constitution in public and public schools, but it is not compulsory.

Political and civil service positions (justice, social security, military and security institutions) should be distributed in proportion to the number of recognised religious groups, also allowing for equal parliamentary representation between Christians and Muslims. Thinking once again of power games, the suspicion that censuses have not been carried out since 1932 is due to the fact that this distribution does not represent the reality of Muslims and Christians, as the latter would lose their influence in the government field. Thus, the General Chief of the Army, the Governor of the Lebanese Bank, the Chief of the Army Secret Police and the President of the Republic are Maronites. About 15 years ago, the Shiites took over the Ministry of Finance, and recently the Internal Security Force, which previously belonged to the Maronites. The Prime Minister has been Sunni since 1943, the result of Lebanon's independence following the National Pact, balancing the confessional political system.

Muslim religious leaders are appointed by their respective groups and then approved by the government, which is responsible for their salaries, as are Muslim and Druze clerical judges. The same is not true of the Christian patriarchs, who, despite being appointed by the Christian pastoral council, are not paid by the government.

In the next few points of this section, I will only deal with the values and beliefs of each religious denomination that will be investigated through semi-structured interviews with religious leaders, thus excluding several of the eighteen recognised religious denominations.

4.1. Pillars of the Christian Faith

Christianity is a faith based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who inspired his disciples to spread his message, shaping a tradition that today gathers approximately 2.3

billion followers (Pew Research Center, 2020). Central to Christian belief is the principle of love, which extends even to relationships with enemies, and the perception of God as a Father, establishing a close relationship between believers and the divine.

Among key figures in Christian thought, Saint Augustine (354–430) played a crucial role in shaping theological and philosophical concepts that continue to influence Christian traditions. His reflections on love, prayer, faith and reason, conversion, and reconciliation contributed to a deeper understanding of Christian ethics and spirituality. He viewed faith as essential for understanding divine truth, emphasised the transformative power of conversion, and saw the Christian community as a pillar of spiritual support (Augustine, 2009, p. 159; 2012, p. 970).

These foundational ideas have had a lasting impact on Christian thought and practice, shaping not only theological discourse but also ethical principles that inform attitudes towards peace, justice, and reconciliation—concepts that remain relevant in interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution.

4.1.1. Monasticism and the Maronite Faith

As we have seen in previous sections, the Maronite Church descends from the influence of St Maron, a Syrian hermit monk from the 4th century, contemporary and friend of St John Chrysostom, whose influence through asceticism, miracles and spiritual teachings drove the missionary movement that gave rise to the Christian ethnic-religious group in Lebanon. Despite some differences in rites and liturgical and theological expressions, this Eastern church is in communion with the Catholic Church and shares several pillars of its faith with many Christian confessions, such as the belief in the Holy Trinity, considering the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as a single omnipresent divinity expressed in three coeternal, consubstantial and coequal persons. The complexity of this designation distinguishes between the Father as the Creator of the Universe, the Son as the incarnation of God the Father, assuming the role of salvation as a human, and the Holy Spirit as the envelope in the heart of each believer offering spiritual guidance and consoling in tribulations.

In a special way, Maronites are devoted to the personification of the Maronite Church, which brings the faithful together at the centre of spiritual and liturgical life. On the same level is devotion to the patron saint St Maron, who is a model of holiness for the faithful and a purpose for consolidating their faith. The Maronite Liturgy is rooted in the primitive rites of the Christian communities of Antioch, set to music with traces of Arab culture, giving various tones embellished by the origins of our fado, becoming

ceremonies that bring the faithful closer to *philocallia*, that is, the love of beauty and goodness.

This Christian community also has a great devotion to the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, She is considered an intercessor in the spiritual life of the faithful because of her human capacity to welcome God into her heart and actions, with perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity. Monasticism also plays a fundamental role, not only through the example of St Maron, but also through the search for holiness and spiritual communion with God, through simplicity and hesychastic prayer in favour of inner and communal peace. Finally, like all Christian confessions, Maronites are also called to help those most in need, to promote justice and peace through works of charity, making them responsible for charity and social justice.

The Maronite Church also has a special devotion to St Charbel, a 19th century Lebanese hermit saint whose life of prayer, austerity and penance made him an example to follow in his dedication to the scriptures and contemplation. His humble nature allowed him to perform several miracles during his life and after his death, and he is venerated by many faithful of different Christian confessions and even Muslims who ask for his intercession for their individual trials.

4.1.2. Basis of the Greek Orthodox Faith

The Greek Orthodox Church is based on the first Christian communities evangelised by Christ's apostles, particularly under the influence of the travels of St Paul, who offered spiritual direction to the Christian faithful through his example and his letters to the Ephesians, Galatians, Thessalonians, Philippians, Colossians and Corinthians. The Greek language played a fundamental role in the Christian liturgy, elevating the faith to other meanings, the fruit of a philosophical and democratic thought rooted in the region. Saint John Chrysostom had an enormous influence on the understanding of Christian values, giving a new awareness to Orthodox theology and liturgy through his sermons, at a time when Christianity went from being a clandestine religion to an official one in the Roman Empire, making liturgical organisation more complex than in the Catholic Church. His thinking hurt many influential people of the time, as his criticism of politicians and other members of power led him into exile after some reforms in the church, after leading several people to reflect on the intimacy of their conscience (Chrysostom, 2022, p.45).

The Greek Orthodox Church was also the target of the Great Schism of 1054 AD, developing a distinct identity and tradition over the centuries and today maintaining a

significant role in the religious life of Greek communities. Thus, their faith is moulded by the apostolic tradition, in which the succession of ordination of bishops follows the same example and historical principles that began with Christ's apostles. Orthodox doctrine reflects the Holy Trinity, with Jesus represented as the incarnation of God the Father, who offers a path to salvation and sanctification. Greek Orthodoxy has a rich tradition of human and divine symbolism through iconography, as instruments of veneration and explanation of the faith with the example of images that reflect episodes of Christian life expressed in the actions of the saints, telling their stories by contextualising the faithful with perseverance, faith and human frailty. Like the Catholic Church, the Eastern Greek faith celebrates seven sacraments (baptism, reconciliation, Eucharist, anointing of the sick, marriage and ordination) as central to the journey and growth of Christian life. Since 2008, Jerome II has been Patriarch of Athens and the whole of Greece. He is the highest leader of this Christian confession, followed by a hierarchical structure made up of bishops, priests and deacons who administer the church. As we have already seen, prayer is a common point among the Christian churches, but the importance of fasting in prayer is a condition of religious life, especially in Lent, helping the believer to get closer to the trials and difficulties experienced by Jesus of Nazareth himself in the Judean desert for forty days. Finally, the search for holiness is strongly recommended through asceticism, which offers a renunciation of earthly pleasures as a form of spiritual purification in order to reach a place closer to God, with hermits and ascetics renouncing their earthly life, considering themselves dead to the world, raising them to the condition of being alive only for God and for the love of their neighbour.

The Greek Orthodox Church is in communion with Byzantine Orthodoxy (based on the principles of equality of the Christian pentarchy - Rome, Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria and Jerusalem) in the values of its faith, however it differs in its ecclesiastical structure, being considered autocephalous, in which the bishops representing a particular church have no obligation to report decisions, thoughts or actions to any superior bishop. Here they maintain the principle of equality to the detriment of hierarchy, as is the case in Catholicism, in which the Pope is the church's highest authority. This Christian unity allows the faithful to commune in an Orthodox church other than the one in which they were baptised, while also sharing a relationship of dialogue and fraternity, meeting in synods or councils to discuss important common decisions, as happened in previous ecumenical councils, which were fundamental in determining the Orthodox faith. The main differences with the Catholic Church are:

| Features | Roman Catholic Church | Eastern Orthodox Church |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Doctrine | Salvation is achieved through faith and works. | Salvation is achieved through faith. |
| Hierarchy | The Pope is the highest leader of the Church, considered infallible in matters of doctrine and faith. | Each bishop has autonomy in his church and there is no one above him or infallible. However, it is in the councils that doctrinal decisions are made. |
| Jesus | The Holy Spirit comes from the Father and the Son. | The Holy Spirit comes only from the Father. |
| Liturgy | After the Second Vatican Council, some rites and rituals were transformed. | The ceremonies have followed the classical liturgy since their foundation. |
| Priesthood | Accessible only to celibate men. | Accessible to married and celibate men. |
| Fasting | Deprivation of meat is recommended during Lent, especially on Fridays. | In three periods of the year, fasting from various foods is recommended. |
| Purgatory | Purgatory exists for souls who are not yet ready to enter Paradise. | They don't believe in purgatory. |
| Iconography | Various images are venerated, from paintings to statues. | Images should only be venerated through icons. |
| Sacraments | The sacraments are part of a lifelong journey, and there are specific moments for the cause. | After baptism, the faithful are authorised to receive all the other sacraments at once. |
| Calendar | They follow the Gregorian calendar | They follow the Julian calendar |
| Transubstantiation | The bread and wine are substantially transformed into the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. | They believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but not through the transformation of bread and wine. |

Figure 13 - Differences between Catholic and Orthodox Church

In Lebanon, the Greek Orthodox Church has a centuries-old presence dating back to the time of the Greek diaspora in the country, and has played an important role in education and training. Like the various religions in the country, the Greek Orthodox make an effort to promote interfaith dialogue for a peaceful society and interfaith meetings for coexistence and tolerance in this religious mosaic. Historically, it is important to note that the Orthodox were mainly in Syria, representing a humble number of faithful in Lebanon. Thus, aligned with the Syrian government, Lebanese independence in 1943 was a defeat for their interests. However, they later realised the advantages of religious representation in the confessional political system and the definition of territorial borders, framed in the declaration of Greater Lebanon (1920), became beneficial for all religious communities, including the Orthodox. To put it in context, the Orthodox Patriarch has always been Syrian, and since the war in Syria, he has been the political-religious representative in the West of President Bashar al-Assad.

4.1.3. Educational Mission in the Protestant Reformation

Protestantism arose in the 16th century by various thinkers, notably Luther and Calvin, as a protest against the religious and social practices perpetrated by the Catholic Church, leading to the Western Schism that split Christianity into more fractions. Several ideas emerged from this movement, including the Bible as the sole authority in matters of faith and religious practice, giving the faithful the opportunity to make their own interpretations of the scriptures. Protestants only recognised two sacraments (baptism and the Eucharist), arguing that salvation is achieved through faith in Jesus Christ and not by works, a criticism of the misguided indulgences practised by Catholics at the time. They also argued that all Christians had direct access to God and not just through the clergy, with church administrators recognised as pastors, a role that was available to celibates and married people. The fact that the Protestant Church had a history of separating church and state made it possible to create a capitalist spirit that played a fundamental role in the development of various societies through individual responsibility, hard work and the accumulation of wealth. However, according to Weber, this Protestant rationalism and ethics also led to a loss of mystery and religious mysticism, which he characterised as the "disenchantment of the world" that helped to develop increasingly secular societies.

The Protestant Church in Lebanon emerged in the 19th century as a result of Presbyterian, Anglican and Lutheran missionaries with the aim of promoting education and social responses, having founded several schools to meet the needs of the population that had few educational establishments in contrast to the Muslim education sponsored by the Ottoman Empire. Even today, its schools and universities are of respectable quality in the country, continuing to provide Christian education in a society with enormous religious diversity. As a recognised religion in the country, it also takes part in various interfaith dialogue initiatives with the aim of contributing to peaceful coexistence, even though its faithful are only a minority in the Lebanese population.

4.1.4. Greek Catholicism, a bridge between East and West

Also known as the Greek-Melkite Catholic Church, a term that distinguished Christians who supported the arguments of the emperor faith at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), the centre of the See of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria has been led by Patriarch Youssef Absi since 2017. During the Eastern Schism, the Greek Catholics tried to maintain a more balanced position in the disagreements between Rome and Constantinople, maintaining a careful dialogue between the two, but preserving the

Byzantine rites in their ceremonies. In the meantime, over the centuries efforts were made towards a fuller rapprochement, most notably the Council of Florence (1439) and the re-emergence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (1724), thus consolidating a fortified communion with Catholicism, recognising the Pope as the highest authority, but maintaining the Greek-Catholic hierarchy, as well as its arguments in the doctrine of the faith, rooted in the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom.

The Greek Catholic Church is currently a bridge of dialogue between East and West, reflecting its own dogmatic thinking, making its ceremonies and beliefs a mixture of Eastern and Western traditions. In Lebanon, its expression is smaller among Christians, but due to its own history, it plays a creative role in interfaith dialogue, having some influence in the regions that make up the Levant.

4.2. Pillars of the Muslim Faith

Islam emerged in the early 7th century through the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, who is regarded by Muslims as the final messenger of God. The Qur'an, considered the holy book of Islam, serves as the primary source of spiritual and moral guidance, reinforcing the central tenet of monotheism: belief in the One God, Allah. While sharing Abrahamic origins with Christianity and Judaism, Islam differs in its perception of Jesus, viewing him as a prophet rather than the Son of God.

The foundations of the Muslim faith rest upon five pillars, which shape religious, ethical, and spiritual life:

1. **Shahada (profession of faith):** Declaring that "there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger."
2. **Salat (prayer):** Performing five daily prayers while facing Mecca.
3. **Zakat (charity):** Contributing a portion of one's wealth to support those in need.
4. **Sawm (fasting):** Observing the Ramadan fast as a means of self-discipline and spiritual purification.
5. **Hajj (pilgrimage):** Undertaking a journey to Mecca at least once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able.

These principles guide the daily lives of Muslims, shaping their relationship with God, their community, and broader society. As a religion deeply embedded in social and political structures, Islam continues to play a crucial role in shaping ethical and legal frameworks in many regions worldwide.

4.2.1. The Shia community and its influence in Lebanon

The origin of segregation in Islam came after the death of the Prophet Mohammed (632 AD), who did not offer much guidance on his succession. Thus, the *Shiites* (from Arabic, supporters of Ali) argued that the Prophet's succession should continue in his family, with Ali Talib, his cousin and the husband of his daughter Fatima, being the best placed to take on the role. As time went by, this division became more and more evident, and today it represents approximately 15 per cent of the Muslim community, with the greatest expression in Iran.

Religious leadership is administered by the Imams in mosques and Muslim communities, who are responsible for transmitting and interpreting the foundations of the Islamic faith. Their religious authority is infallible, free from any kind of sin or fault, as they have a profound knowledge of religious doctrine.

The similarity with the Sunni tradition is very great, with only a different ideology about Ali and his descendants being emphasised in their prayers and rituals. The interpretation of the Battle of Karbala also has significance in the view of the two main Islamic factions, considered fundamental for understanding Shiite history, since Muhammad's grandson, Hussein ibn Ali, died in battle against the self-proclaimed Sunni Umayyad ruler Yazid I in 680 AD. For the Shiites, this battle represents resistance to oppression and injustice, expressed in religious ceremonies, making Hussein a martyr. Ashura is the main ceremony in memory of the martyr, involving a historical construction of the battle, culminating in dramatic representations with acts of self-flagellation, sharing the suffering of one of Mohammed's descendants. In Karbala, an Iraqi city, there is the Shrine of Hussein, which plays a very important role in the life of the Shiites, being a place of worship and pilgrimage where reflections are made on justice and resistance.

This Muslim group is subdivided into three main branches: the Shiites of the Twelve Magnets, who have a historical background in Lebanon, the Ismailis, who had their exponent of power through the Fatimids of Egypt, and the Zaidites, who have a greater expression in Yemen.

In Lebanon, the Shiites (31.2 per cent) have a very balanced representation with the Sunnis (31.9 per cent), playing a significant role in political, military and social actions in the country, mainly concentrated in the south, in the Bekaa region and in some areas of the capital. Their influence and power is great, because as well as having a large political representation in parliament and in ministries, they also carry out significant social work, from health, education and social assistance to the most needy. However,

their greatest representation is mirrored in the religious-political-military group Hezbollah (Party of God), creating some controversy in its classification by the international community as a terrorist group. The truth is that their actions against Israel in 1980 elevated this group to the status of a major political and military actor in defence of the country. However, they acted in accordance with some practices that were not recommended at international level, such as kidnapping and murdering anyone who opposed their decisions. In the meantime, this Iranian-backed group has characterised itself as an Islamic resistance whose mission is to fight against foreign occupations, promoting the interests of Lebanese Shiites and also having influence in Syria and Iraq. However, given the religious and cultural diversity in Lebanon, the Shiites also play an important role in interfaith dialogue.

4.2.2. Sunni Tradition and Vision

Unlike the Shiites, the Sunnis (People of Tradition and Community) argued that Muhammad's succession should be made through Abu Bakr, the prophet's advisor during his lifetime, thus calling for a democratic vote by the Muslim people to strengthen unity among the faithful, a situation that was rejected by the Shiites. This religious group argues that the succession of religious leaders should be chosen within the community on the basis of merit and quality rather than kinship, moving closer to democratic ideals and away from the monarchy. In this sense, it is organised and led by caliphates, in which a caliph is elected, i.e. a representative or successor, the first of whom was Abu Bakr after the death of Mohammed. This group considers itself to be more moderate than the Shiites, contradicting the view of groups like ISIS, Hamas, Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda who profess Sunni traditions, leading to different interpretations of the sacred texts, radicalising them. In contrast, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis' 2020 encyclical on social friendship and human fraternity, was inspired by the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed in 2019 by Pope Francis and Imam Ahmed Mohamed el-Tayeb⁴⁶, represents Sunni flexibility in interreligious dialogue for peace. Basically, the flexibility of this religious confession takes its faithful to both extremes, educating potential peacemakers and extremists.

However, in addition to affirming that Allah is the only Being worthy of worship, excluding the existence of children or relatives, Sunni Muslims value the importance of prophets such as Jesus, Abraham and Moses, as well as the importance of their holy

⁴⁶ Recognised as a leading authority in the Sunni Muslim community, he currently serves as rector of al-Azhar University, as well as Imam of Egypt's Grand Mosque.

books. They also believe in angels as God's messengers and in the Day of Judgement, where everyone will be judged according to their actions and beliefs.

Like the Shiites, the main source of spiritual guidance is the Koran, but they also value the hadiths (verbal communications from Muhammad that were only written down later) as another tool for prayer and religious guidance. In contrast to the Shiite veneration of Ali, Sunnis have a great devotion to the first four caliphs (Abu Bakr, Omar, Ottoman and Ali) who are recognised as the "well-guided caliphs", a symbol of justice and leadership in the Sunni world. Today, Sunnis make up around 85 per cent of the Muslim community and have four main legal schools, which teach different interpretations of Islamic law, resulting in legal practices and processes that are not very consensual. *Hanafi* is the oldest Sunni legal school, with a greater presence in Asia (South, Southeast and Centre), Eastern Europe and North Africa, showing greater flexibility in legal decisions, the result of its logical rationalism in interpreting the Koran, the teachings and oral traditions of Muhammad and the consensus of the community. They specialise in finance, commerce and family law. The *Maliki* judiciary is more present in Nigeria, Mali, Algeria and Tunisia and is much more conservative in its judicial decisions, demanding the application of the literal sharia, especially in places where traditions are more diverse. Although they are based on the same legal documents as the other schools and listen to community consensus, their flexibility is very limited. Shafi'i is also very conservative in order to avoid new interpretations of Islamic traditions, relying on the same tools for analysing the sharia, but they have developed a systematic methodology for interpreting Islamic jurisprudence taking into account its context and making the total consensus of the Muslim community in the courts the ultimate authority in judicial decisions. Finally, Hanbali, with its main status in Saudi Arabia, is also a conservative school of legal thought, always resorting to primary sources rather than new interpretations. They also rely on the same tools of analysis, but their decisions are very limited to what is written in the Sharia.

In Lebanon, the Sunnis represent a large part of the population and have great influence at the political level, since the Prime Minister is always Sunni, according to the confessional system of governance. Religious leaders perform Islamic legal, religious and social consultancy functions, carry out some charitable work, and are very active in humanitarian assistance supporting refugees, community development, inter-religious dialogue and support for health and education, which has a scholarship programme for needy university students. Geographically they are more in the north of Lebanon, with a strong presence in Tripoli and Beirut. With Saudi Arabia being the largest Sunni

representative, Lebanese Sunnis have strong links with the Saudis, which is a fundamental connection for their decisions in the country.

4.2.3. Druzes and the spiritual journey for truth

As we saw in the historical approach, the Druze derive from the clan of Sunni Muslim Tanukhs who arrived in the country in 758 AD and who in the 11th century began to follow the Druze Islamic sect founded by Muhammad ad-Darazi, a preacher who believed that the Caliph al-Hakim was the incarnation of Allah.

Thus, Druze beliefs are based on Sunni ideals, but their nature is closer to the esoteric and mystical, and they are characterised by other Muslims more as a sect than a religion. In this sense, their practices and rituals are more secretive, and they don't make their beliefs known to anyone outside the group. However, despite all the secrecy, we know that the foundations of their faith are centred on the idea of the One God, whose worship is exclusive to them. The Druze also believe in the reincarnation of the soul, living successive lives until reaching a kind of nirvana, in the sense of purification of the soul, which leads the believer ever closer to God. One of the pillars that distinguishes it from other Muslim faiths is the divine manifestation of "truth" (al-haqqu), divided into spiritual truth and supreme reality, providing spiritual guidance and knowledge for those who seek the truth, which can manifest itself as the incarnation (al-mazhar) of God. As far as its leadership and organisation are concerned, as we have already seen, this religious group is a closed and exclusive community for those who agree to convert to their faith, and they are led by spiritual leaders called "wise men" (uqqāl), people who have a broader spiritual and religious knowledge, enlightening and guiding their faithful in building their spiritual life, occupying a prestigious place in the Druze community. The remaining members of the community are called "ignorant" (juhāl), because they have not yet reached the level of spiritual understanding and awareness, and are considered to be beginners or wanderers on their spiritual journey towards the truth with the respective guidance of the "wise men". The spiritualities of the Druze are often close to Islamic Sufism, characterised by the direct spiritual journey with God.

Despite their long history in Lebanon, the Druze are a religious minority accounting for around 4.5 per cent of the population, mainly located on Mount Lebanon and Mount Hermon. Like other Muslim communities, the Druze are politically represented in parliament, holding positions in ministries, and have demonstrated their influence throughout the country's history. Despite some disagreements with other religious groups, mainly Sunnis and Shiites, the Druze play their part in developing bonds of

peaceful coexistence in this country of such religious diversity. On the other hand, they also dedicate themselves to social causes, namely alleviating the suffering of refugees in the country, as well as school scholarship programmes for underprivileged students, providing health care, community development projects and promoting their identity and culture, as a way of converting new elements to their spiritual journey for truth.

Drawing on important historical data in the reconciliation process after the Civil War, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir and Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Druze community and the PSP (Progressive Socialist Party), signed a joint document in favour of peace and mutual cooperation, which was perceived by Syrians and pro-Syrians as an attack on their power. However, this document was the beginning of an important journey of co-operation and co-existence after the war, making the relationship between the Maronites and the Druze very positive.

4.2.4. Alawites, metamorphosis for survival

Despite being a minority in the Muslim world, Alawite Muslims have a large representation in power, most notably the fact that Bashar-al-Assad is the president of Syria, having succeeded his father, also an Alawite, who was responsible for the occupation of Lebanon after the 1975 Civil War.

While the Druze derive from the Sunni faith, the Alawite creed absorbs Shiite principles, some Christian elements with regard to the prophecies of Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and also brings together some roots of Zoroastrianism⁴⁷, mainly in the duality of good and evil, in which the Alawites are invited to fight evil in the spiritual search for truth. It is believed that this ethnic-religious community emerged between the 11th and 12th centuries, a time when the crusades played a decisive role in imposing the faith. Thus, it is believed that the link between various elements of different beliefs was a strategy for the survival of this community and to avoid religious persecution, in a period when death or forced conversion was a recurring practice. The account of an anonymous Alawite⁴⁸ said that:

"We are accepted as Muslims because we have worked hard to be accepted. We copied the Sunnis. Some Alawites cover their hair and wear the hijab, either for

⁴⁷ A monotheistic religion founded in the 4th century BC by the Persian prophet Zarathustra, it is one of the oldest religions in the world and has had a great influence on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Ahura Mazda is its Supreme God, the symbol of good, truth, justice and order, who fights an endless battle with Ahriman, the representation of evil in the world. Its sacred book is the Avesta, which contains texts, prayers and hymns to God, told by its founder.

⁴⁸ Taken from http://www.discoveringislam.org/alawi_sect.htm.

personal reasons or when they marry Sunnis. We don't eat pork and, even when we do, we don't eat it in front of people. We fast or pretend to fast; out of respect for others, we don't eat in front of them during Ramadan. We build mosques in our main cities. Some Alawites go to Friday prayer and the Hajj. My grandfather was a modern sheik who encouraged everyone to pray in the Jable mosque. The charitable foundation set up and run by Jamil Al-Asad (brother of former President Hafiz Al-Assad) funds hundreds of Alawites to go to Hajj, and the women who work for the organisation have to wear the hijab. Hafiz Al-Assad prayed in the mosque and fasted. When his mother and son died, he prayed for them in the mosque. He built the Na`isa Mosque in Qardaha, his hometown, in his mother's name. All these things are proof to the Sunnis that we strive to be part of Islam and to be like the Sunnis. They accept it. We have succeeded. (Discovering Islam, n.d.).

However, Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, is considered a central figure worthy of worship, as his deeds elevated him to a divine entity. Like the Druze, the Alawite faith is enveloped in a mysticism and esotericism that traces the personal path in the search for truth and goodness. Their faith is very secretive, opening the door only to those who want to convert to its principles, thus reducing information about its rituals and ceremonies. However, the Alawites believe in reincarnation as a way of purifying the soul, having to be reborn at least seven times in order to gradually get closer to God and occupy a place among the stars, where Ali has the role of prince. They don't believe in resurrection, nor in paradise or hell, but they claim that the perception that some religions have of these abodes is lived out in earthly actions and not in heaven. Despite the importance of the Qur'an for understanding the history of their faith, the holy book of the Alawites is the *Kitab al-Majmu*, a set of texts made up of 16 suras from the Qur'an which summarise their faith by stating that there is no God but Ali ibn-Talib (God's representation on earth) worthy of worship, Muhammad a symbol of praise and al-Farisi (Muhammad's Persian companion, the first convert), an object of love.

They value the role of the family, reserving various ceremonies and rituals exclusively for family communities, and their hierarchy is centred on the guidance that the sheiks give to their faithful, the organisation and execution of religious ceremonies, as well as the perpetuation of traditions, keeping them secret from the outside world so that they are not distorted or the target of discrimination or even religious persecution. However, this hierarchy can be achieved in three different ways: heredity (succession of the religious role belonging to families respected for their long religious tradition), election (there are sheiks who are elected by the religious community to fulfil the administrative role and

religious functions) and initiation (members who go through an initiation process with the aim of receiving exclusive religious and spiritual knowledge, in order to later lead a community). In addition to the five pillars of Islam (belief in One God, prayer, pilgrimage to Mecca, charity and fasting in Ramadan), the Alawites add *jihad* as a fundamental and obligatory pillar for building their faith, and are subject to the decrees of *sharia* (Islamic law).

Although the majority of Alawites are in Syria, in Lebanon they are most represented in the Akkar and Tripoli regions. Like the other recognised religions, the Alawites have a governmental role and political participation, as well as inter-religious dialogue, despite the various sectarian tensions.

4.3. Leadership and interreligious dialogue

As we have seen, Lebanon is a country rich in cultural and religious diversity, making it a fragile territory due to the various factions that aspire to rise to power, increasing discontent and social inequalities that leave the country under various tensions, misunderstandings and conflicts. While it is necessary to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes among the faithful of religious groups, it is equally important that this deconstruction also comes from their religious leaders in order to legitimise thinking in favour of peaceful coexistence. This thesis is framed in Sustainable Development Goals 4 (quality education) and 16 (peace, justice and effective institutions), yet the role of interreligious dialogue in conflict transformation has been disregarded or at least downplayed, when in reality it can play a very important role in building peace in fragmented societies similar to the Lebanese map, because religion has the goal of promoting peace and has the ability to dictate the rules. In this sense, it is necessary to develop new strategies that put conflict resolution on a more sustainable footing, to the detriment of quick fixes in momentary conflicts.

As we have seen, the Middle East has been a stage for conflicts masked by religion, due to its importance in society, justifying and legitimising violence due to manipulated and misguided interpretations of its holy books by those who aspire to power. External interventions often overshadow the efforts of religious actors to bring about reconciliation, when in reality this perseverance builds more sustainable foundations, albeit in the long term, as is the case in educational processes.

After fifteen years of war, interreligious dialogue has become a target of interest for some elites as a solution for reconciliation and peace reconstruction, developing various studies that project different solutions, but which in reality still fall short "in

understanding the practical initiatives of community interreligious dialogue and its role in creating an egalitarian, just, equitable and sustainable society" (Fahed & Daou, 2021, p. 26).

In a study carried out in northern Lebanon, which aimed to understand the role, advantages and achievements of religious leaders⁴⁹, it was realised that the relationship and friendship developed between the different leaders created "a sense of security and familiarity which, in turn, allowed them to break down the barriers of fear and work together for the greater good" (Fahed & Daou, 2021, p. 28). This initiative was based on building an interreligious dialogue that had been dormant due to fear and the uncertainty of getting to know the "other", and could become more susceptible to personal and social transformation. In a multicultural society, the importance of dialogue goes beyond religious exchange, otherwise it would be reduced to the intervention of a few experts, when it is necessary to involve and give voice to the concerns and fears of all those involved in territories of this magnitude. The Vatican document Dialogue and Proclamation (1991) distinguishes and links different forms of dialogue with a view to peaceful coexistence between individuals from different backgrounds, highlighting the *dialogue of life* (a spirit of solidarity and friendship in which good and bad times are shared), *dialogue of works* (cooperation between actors of different religions for common development), *dialogue of theological exchanges* (understanding, discussion and appreciation of different religious traditions analysed by experts) and *dialogue of religious experience* (sharing of spiritual faith based on the experience of prayer, contemplation and the search for closeness to the divine). Thus, interfaith dialogue incorporates many aspects of conflict transformation, building a foundation of communication and friendship, and is essential for building sustainable peace, especially in communities where religion plays a vital role in society (Fahed & Daou, 2021). In essence, the characteristic of interreligious dialogue goes beyond communication carried out in debates, negotiations or mediations, as it delves deeper into the intuition of the heart, allowing it to assess "the hidden causes of deep-rooted conflicts" and approach solutions with active and cooperative participation (Fahed & Daou, 2021, p. 29). The aim is for those involved to be the authors of their own change with a view to sustainable peace that coexists in the midst of adversity. It is important to stress that reconciliation is born out of conscious dialogue and inner reflection that is transposed outwards. In

⁴⁹ A Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation project set up in 2014 to create a Sustainable Network for Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon with the aim of deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes in favour of peaceful coexistence.

matters of interreligious dialogue, the aim is not to put our beliefs on the back burner, but to highlight the beauty of difference and to grow in individual or collective faith by sharing experiences that raise the individual to a level of understanding and moral awareness in relation to the other's point of view.

Of course, inter-religious dialogue also has its challenges, as I remember being present at one of those meetings with religious leaders in Tripoli, where at first the dialogue was more about proclaiming or announcing their faith than actually listening to the concerns of others. Another challenge is to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes, taking into account the roots of their culture and faith built up over the years, since we are talking about a majority of religious leaders of a more mature age. The physical religious segregation built up over the centuries is still visible in many cities, with Christian neighbourhoods and streets clearly marked with the image of a saint or the Madonna, and Muslim neighbourhoods with small signs of the veneration of Allah. With so many wars and conflicts, social and psychological barriers have also been built up, creating prejudices and stereotypes about others, passing on information from generation to generation that doesn't correspond to the reality of what is thought and experienced on the other side. This is all the result of the failure to create safe spaces that provide the opportunity to get to know and interact with the "other", who, regardless of their differences and origins, have very similar concerns because they are the children of a collective history built on instability that is susceptible to conflict. It is therefore important to build a path that comes closer to dialogue from the heart, so that understanding, security, respect, tolerance, cooperation and friendship can be sown between those involved, with a view to building a fairer, more equitable and peaceful society.

The alleged encounter⁵⁰ between Saint Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malik al-Kamil at the beginning of the 13th century is often interpreted as a reflection of his willingness to engage in a dialogue of understanding without denying his identity. While widely believed to have taken place, there is no definitive historical evidence to confirm this meeting beyond hagiographic accounts and Franciscan tradition. St Francis advised his brothers to "avoid all forms of aggression or contention and also to live a humble and fraternal submission, even with those who did not share their faith" (Pope Francis, 2020,

⁵⁰ A meeting that took place in Egypt during the Fifth Crusade, in which the poor friar from Assisi wanted to appeal for peace and conversion to God's love among the Muslim peoples, resulted in a narrative that still symbolises a major step forward in the desire for dialogue and peace between the two religious traditions.

p.2). This humility and willingness of St Francis to face the dangers of the armed conflict of the Fifth Crusade impressed Sultan al-Kamil and resulted in a series of friendly conversations over several days, creating a relationship of mutual respect and learning to share cultures.

With this example, we can see the importance and impact that a religious leader can have in building secure bridges for peace, dialogue and respect, being crucial for the balance of a society of such cultural and religious diversity. Thus, a religious leader should be a positive example through their practices of respect, cooperation and compassion, promoting an attitude of respect for religious pluralism, recognising that it is possible to achieve divine spirituality through other religious traditions. They should also encourage tolerance and acceptance, reducing judgement in favour of learning with and from difference. They must also be promoters of peace, condemning violence in the name of religion, because God "does not need to be defended by anyone and does not want his name to be used to terrorise people" (Pope Francis, 2020, p. 76). In addition to being a promoter of social justice and human rights, he must also exercise open and constructive dialogue, being available to participate and collaborate in various meetings and projects. Like Francis of Assisi, he must have an attitude of humility and empathy, recognising his limitations in understanding the faith of others, but showing a willingness to learn and welcome them into his heart. Finally, given the basis of this research, a religious leader must motivate and promote interfaith education to his or her faithful, capable of overcoming prejudices and stereotypes so that this results in a greater understanding and respect for the beliefs of the "other", extolling the beauty and richness of diversity.

Conclusion

With this chapter, it was possible to understand the set of historical, cultural, religious and social events that have shaped the diversity of Lebanese identity over several generations, marked by successive conflicts and the search for solutions to build a sustainable peace. Therefore, the aim of this section was to understand the historical, religious and cultural trajectory, in order to analyse more carefully the roots of current conflicts, silent threats and the power dynamics that still persist. It should be borne in mind that the underlying wars and conflicts not only destroyed the country's infrastructure and economy, but also exacerbated mistrust between different ethnic and religious groups, motivating the rise of extremist armed groups such as Hezbollah.

Cultural and religious diversity allows for the creation of unique opportunities for the country's social and identity wealth, yet it also continues to be a factor of tension, despite

the political system of governance, which promotes a distribution of power and equitable representation of religious groups, yet often exacerbates divisions and hinders effective governance. It is therefore important to focus on inter-religious dialogue between religious leaders, so that they can have a discourse and actions of solidarity with their faithful, aimed at sustainable peaceful coexistence. On the other hand, political reforms are needed in search of a strong and transparent rule of law, in which education must be considered fundamental in the process of social transformation, moulding the new generations towards tolerance and friendship. The next chapter will explore the Lebanese educational context, analysing the challenges and solutions through non-formal education.

CHAPTER III

Educating in the Storm: Odds and Hopes for Non-Formal Education in Lebanon

UNICEF (2022) warns of the dramatic situation of rights violations in education, stating that the current situation in Lebanon is having a major impact on school drop-outs, who are swapping classrooms for precarious temporary and irregular jobs to help feed their families. While in the 2020/21 school year school enrolment absorbed 60 per cent of all children and young people in the country, today only 43 per cent of school-age individuals attend educational institutions.

The danger of this situation calls into question the prevention of labour abuses and sexual exploitation, as well as the loss of childhood, because according to the annual UNICEF report (2022), even children in families that are normatively accepted survive in the midst of constant arguments between their parents, reaching some more aggressive scenarios, the main theme of which is the inability to keep up financially with basic expenses. This message is not only passed on to their children, but also to keep them from being children, as the solution often involves them working to make ends meet. On the other hand, the report also demonstrates children's awareness of the violation of their rights, realising that in other countries these rights are guaranteed, motivating them to migrate in the future.

Of course, the seriousness takes a different turn when it comes to Syrian or Palestinian refugees, and there are reports of discrimination by Lebanese students exerting physical and psychological violence on those who have fled the war. These situations are more frequent in poorer regions, where Lebanese families are experiencing many difficulties, blaming the refugees for worsening their current situation. Unfortunately, this discourse is also fed by many public-school teachers in these regions, who, in addition to not having adequate pedagogical training, characterise the refugees in their classes as bad role models for Lebanese students, legitimising and perpetuating disagreements between students from the two nations (UNICEF, 2022).

Given that the refugee camps are located in poorer areas, access to quality public schools is often denied to Syrians and Palestinians, always giving priority to students from more influential families, when they don't attend private educational institutions due to the difficulty of paying tuition fees as a result of the economic crisis affecting various spheres of social life.

Meanwhile, in 2018, Lebanese education was ranked fourth in the world for learning maths and science and tenth for quality of education according to the World Economic Forum. However, after the pandemic and the worsening socio-economic crisis, the

quality of education in the country fell to 70th place⁵¹ , according to other ranking formats.

The Lebanese education system is organised into twelve years of study, just like in Portugal, but the division is broken down into different points. Thus, elementary school runs from the first to the sixth year, followed by middle school, which covers the seventh, eighth and ninth year of learning. At the end of this cycle, students receive a certificate of completion that legitimises them for the world of work, leaving school early. Secondary school is divided between vocational education and general secondary education, in which they acquire three years of knowledge.

Pre-school education (3 to 5 years old) is not compulsory, but it is widely attended, not only because it is free, but also because it allows parents to work, albeit often temporarily and precariously. Higher education is also not compulsory, but the only public university in the country is the *Lebanese University*, which has campuses in various locations around the country, offering various courses in the areas of "science, technology and health" and "social sciences and humanities", with tuition fees varying depending on the course. It is important to note that at this university, Palestinians pay the same tuition fees as Lebanese, increasing equal opportunities, despite the Palestinians' economic difficulties. The other universities are private and accessible to those who can afford the quality of education. The teaching languages vary between Arabic, English and French, depending on the university, as there are French, American, English, Turkish and Arabic higher education institutions... This diversity of teaching promotes some competitiveness, increasing the quality of education, which unfortunately is not accessible to everyone.

1.1. Challenges of education policies in the Lebanese context

As already identified, the education system in Lebanon is deeply rooted in a context of great cultural and religious diversity, the result of numerous historical events marked by wars and conflicts. Current education policies seek to overcome the constant challenges and find opportunities to improve education and build the country, but inequalities and social exclusions mould the educational landscape, limiting quality education for all.

⁵¹ <https://www.datapandas.org/ranking/education-rankings-by-country#top>

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE⁵²) is the government body responsible for overseeing Lebanon's education system, regulating both public and private schools, the latter often affiliated with religious institutions. These private religious schools are known for offering a higher quality of education compared to the public sector. However, the educational curriculum is standardised by the MEHE, but schools have some autonomy to make local adaptations, considering the religious context in which they are located and the vulnerable situations of social groups, particularly refugees. The large influx of refugees has put significant pressure on public schools, and the current economic crisis has further strained education funding.

El Hage (2015) emphasises the importance of developing a more inclusive curriculum that addresses the needs of a plural and diverse society. He also argues that in-service teacher training should be a priority, ensuring that teachers are equipped to provide quality education in a multicultural and religiously diverse environment, free of prejudice, in a multicultural and religiously diverse environment.

Despite the oversight of MEHE, the education system serves various religious communities, which, given the autonomy of schools and the emerging local challenges, can contribute to reinforcing sectarian divisions. This diversity, coupled with inequalities and a lack of national cohesion, creates vulnerabilities that can be exploited by radical and extremist ideologies. Nashabe (2003) emphasises the evidence of inequalities in access to education, with the differences between rural and urban areas, as well as different socio-economic classes, being very visible. Thus, El Hage (2015) suggests an in-depth reform of education policies that goes beyond physical infrastructure, focusing primarily on "the quality of teaching, curriculum development, and ongoing teacher training" (p. 23). These reforms are especially relevant in the context of Lebanon, where addressing and reconciling the diversity of religious and cultural communities is essential for building a cohesive education system. This recommendation is valid for any education system that seeks to balance diversity with national cohesion, ensuring that teaching practices and curricula are inclusive and representative of the broader social fabric. Given the entire Lebanese context, education should be seen as a valuable tool for preventing ideological radicalisation and religious extremism, promoting peace education programmes capable of equipping young people for the challenges of conflict resolution and promoting a culture of peace (El Hage, 2015).

⁵² <https://www.mehe.gov.lb/ar>

Given all the setbacks in the country's socio-economic context, it is equally important to promote the involvement and alignment of the entire educational community (family members, staff and religious leaders) in dynamics of inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue, for more effective prevention of religious extremism. Social inclusion in the Lebanese school context is a constant challenge, not only because of the marginalisation of some minorities and refugees, but also because of the whole socio-economic crisis, which has affected even the upper classes, erecting walls of inequality in access to quality education (Nashabe, 2003). Despite all the difficulties, there is an effort by the government to implement educational programmes to integrate refugee children, promoting psychosocial support initiatives and doubling school hours and shifts. However, this means more strain on teachers, with no increase in their salaries, which is reflected in dissatisfaction in the classroom, which draws more maladjusted attitudes and behaviours into the hidden curriculum.

The ongoing war between Israel, Hamas, and Hezbollah has further exacerbated the already fragile situation in Lebanon, deepening a sense of fear and mistrust that has had profound and multifaceted consequences for Lebanese students, significantly limiting their future prospects. Schools in areas close to conflict zones have been forced to close, leading to repeated interruptions in the school calendar and a breakdown in the continuity of education. According to UNESCO (2018), armed conflict often results in schools being targeted or used for military purposes, thereby disrupting educational processes and depriving students of safe learning environments. In Lebanon, this situation is compounded by forced displacement, as many families are driven from their homes, making school transfers more challenging.

Additionally, many students are compelled to abandon their studies to seek precarious jobs in order to provide financial support for their families, a phenomenon highlighted by Human Rights Watch (2020) in their research on the broader Middle East. This is particularly problematic in Lebanon, where refugee and local students alike face significant barriers to remaining in school. Moreover, the psychological effects of prolonged exposure to violence, bombings, and the loss of loved ones have deeply impacted students' ability to concentrate and engage in their education. As noted by UNICEF (2018), the psychological trauma caused by war contributes to a decline in academic performance and motivation, further hindering students' educational progress and limiting their long-term prospects.

If, on the one hand, the threat in southern Lebanon is clear, with constant bombardment, which despite Israel's claim that it intends to hit military targets, schools and libraries are often part of the collateral damage, exacerbating the territorial inequality of access to education and opening up opportunities for Hezbollah to recruit military youth. On the other hand, the rest of the country lives under a silent threat, as this context of undeclared conflict leaves a trail of insecurity, fear, but also a sense of *carpe diem*.

Given the educational disparity between conflict zones and relatively safer regions, school autonomy in Lebanon has, at times, allowed extremist propaganda to infiltrate curricula, particularly in areas heavily influenced by Hezbollah. In these regions, narratives of resistance, military heroism, and divine missions are promoted, distorting the fundamental role of education and perpetuating Hezbollah's fundamentalist ideologies. According to Hamzeh (2004), Hezbollah has actively used education as a means to disseminate its ideology, particularly in the south of Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, where its influence is strongest. UNESCO (2018) further emphasizes that, in conflict zones, schools may be repurposed to propagate ideologies that glorify violence and military action, thus deviating from the intended educational objectives. Additionally, as noted by Human Rights Watch (2020), in areas under the control of militant groups, educational institutions can become platforms for promoting radicalization, embedding extremist narratives into the curriculum under the guise of autonomy, further exacerbating sectarian tensions and limiting the future prospects of the youth exposed to such content.

1.2. [The potential of non-formal education](#)

Formal education is often so wrapped up in bureaucracy and fulfilling educational programmes that it sometimes misses out on the essentials of education, such as tapping into students' true interests and enhancing their talents. Paulo Freire (1967) criticises the way in which formal education can increasingly alienate individuals, making them mere followers of an elite that manipulates education into "object man". Thus, Freire seeks a transformative education that directs the individual towards freedom, not only of his mind but also of the society that oppresses him, becoming the author of his decisions as a "man-subject".

Non-formal education arises as a response to some of the limitations found within the formal education system, which often struggles to address the diverse needs of learners in conflict-prone environments like Lebanon. While formal education tends to follow a structured, standardised curriculum regulated by the Ministry of Education, it may not

always be flexible or inclusive enough to cater to vulnerable populations, such as refugees or those in marginalised communities. In this context, non-formal education offers a complementary and transformative approach. It provides alternative spaces for learning that are more adaptive to local needs, encouraging community engagement and fostering social responsibility.

According to Coombs & Ahmed (1974), non-formal education is often more flexible and responsive to the immediate needs of individuals and communities, making it an effective tool for social transformation. It not only bridges the gaps left by formal education but also enhances access to learning opportunities through innovative methods and strategies that can motivate and inspire learners. These programmes often take place outside formal school settings, promoting active citizenship, civic responsibility, and community development (Smith, 2001). By engaging learners in real-world issues, non-formal education encourages critical thinking and fosters a sense of social responsibility, which are crucial for rebuilding and strengthening societies affected by conflict.

In scenarios such as the Lebanese reality, non-formal education can be essential, not only as a contribution to learning that is not accessible to some children and young people, but also in acquiring the means for cooperation, dialogue and peaceful coexistence in the face of the diversity of faiths and cultures. As well as being able to explore young people's interests and talents, it also offers the opportunity to apply their learning in a real context, whether through volunteering programmes, community actions or sharing cultures, facilitating social inclusion and discovering the potential of diversity through critical thinking and creativity in transforming social reality.

So, when we witness the wars raging in Lebanon, the constant sound of air raids, the fear of walking in the streets, and the uncertainty of meeting others, non-formal education in these contexts can become a more accessible option for some students. It provides flexibility in timing, particularly for those who have dropped out of school to contribute financially to their families' survival. As noted by UNESCO (2011), non-formal education can adapt to the changing needs of students in conflict zones, offering opportunities that are often inaccessible in formal educational settings. At the same time, it offers safe spaces for sharing and learning, where students can engage in education within a relatively secure environment, as emphasized by Save the Children (2016). These spaces provide a critical buffer against the trauma of conflict, helping students in a constant dance between risk and danger, while maintaining their engagement with learning. On

the other hand, non-formal education programmes in this field are more flexible, as they can be adapted to meet the specific needs of communities, responding to different levels of learning. In addition to what has been mentioned, the hidden message can help develop perseverance, resilience and empowerment in these contexts, as it helps individuals deal with everyday challenges by developing strategies and skills to minimise the cycle of conflict, leading them to dialogue and solidarity that strengthens a culture of peace. *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation* works under these principles to provide psychosocial and educational support to students most in need. It also contributes to community development through religious leaders, creating conscious dynamics geared towards a discourse of peace and reconciliation for their faithful, thus reducing the scope for manipulation by extremist propaganda and grooming.

However, non-formal education faces a number of challenges, mainly in terms of financial support to carry out its activities. Often the solution is voluntary work, as dependence on international donations and a few NGOs creates an unstable and insufficient system for maintaining educational programmes. On the other hand, the lack of suitable premises also hampers the performance of activities, especially in conflict zones. Training educators or facilitators is another difficulty, as sometimes there is neither the time nor the funding to train these educational actors for the challenges required. In addition, the economic crisis and insecurity can lead to turnover among educators, affecting community trust and the quality of non-formal education. Furthermore, the lack of articulation between formal and non-formal education hinders the transition of students into the formal system, reducing the possibility of progress and continuity in school.

In short, non-formal education in conflict contexts can play a crucial role in active participation without violence, strengthening community ties and shared purposes, and civic responsibility, moulding children and young people as authors of the change they aspire to, thus mitigating the negative effects of conflict. However, the effectiveness of these programmes remains limited by the lack of resources and institutional support, not only because of the context of war and socio-economic crisis, but also because of the opportunities for corruption that arise from these scenarios.

1.2.1. Religious organisations and non-formal education

Considering the multi-religious context of Lebanon, it is crucial to integrate and balance non-formal education with religious principles, as religion plays a significant role in supporting the most disadvantaged communities, restoring human dignity, and fostering

hope. Religious organisations in Lebanon, as noted by El Hage (2015), are pivotal in delivering non-formal education programmes that not only teach fundamental values for peacebuilding, but also provide practical and professional skills to help young people achieve financial autonomy. These programmes often focus on promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, as highlighted by UNESCO (2016), helping learners develop critical skills that enhance their employability. However, challenges frequently arise, particularly around disagreements over curriculum content, varying perspectives on social reality, and the exclusion of individuals who do not share the same faith. This selective inclusion can limit the broader impact of such programmes, undermining their potential to promote widespread social cohesion.

Although non-formal education promoted by religious organisations seeks social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, overcoming sectarian divisions is often a constant challenge, as it is increasingly important to educate by example, and it is crucial to recognise the friendship or empathy between different religious leaders, so that young people also overcome their barriers of prejudice and stereotypes. Some programmes have religious education and the strengthening of faith as their main objective, but this is often not enough to build a culture of peace, because certain interpretations of the holy books often do not take into account the context in which they were written, making a bridge that is out of step with today's reality. However, there are other non-formal educational approaches focused on the prevention of religious extremism, inter-religious dialogue, peace education and the sustainability of social cohesion. However, the themes of preventing religious extremism can diverge between secular programmes based on civic education and human rights, and the discussion of more moderate interpretations of religious teachings.

However, it must be acknowledged that religious organisations play an important role in the provision of education in Lebanon, particularly in marginalised and deprived communities. As Shuayb (2020) points out, "their reach and influence often go beyond the capacity of the state, filling critical gaps in the education system" (p. 45). This highlights how religious organisations have stepped in to offer educational services where government resources fall short, particularly in areas affected by conflict or economic instability. Thus, in contexts of greater adversity and religious diversity, non-formal religious education plays a leading role in society, as it not only transmits school syllabus content, but also has the potential to promote resilience through its traditions, increasing community cohesion, identity and ethics, and can reduce the fascination with extremist propaganda (Miller, 2013). However, greater alignment between religious

organisations, international agencies and NGOs is important in order to increase the effectiveness of educational strategies, sharing knowledge and resources from success stories, as well as lessons learned from failures.

1.2.2. Non-formal education based on the Muslim faith

Education in Muslim schools combine religious teachings with the compulsory national curriculum, creating a balance between scientific knowledge and the spiritual dimension. Subjects such as mathematics, literature, science, foreign languages, Arabic, history, and philosophy are given equal importance alongside the teaching of Islamic studies, which includes the recitation, memorisation, and interpretation of the Quran, the study of Prophet Mohammed's traditions, and the interpretation of the hadiths⁵³. As Hashim & Langgulong (2008) explain, the integration of both secular and religious education is key to providing a holistic approach in Muslim schools. This approach emphasizes not only the development of professional and scientific skills but also the understanding of Islamic laws and their practical application in everyday life. The detailed study of Muhammad's life (teachings and examples) further forms the basis of Muslim education, contributing to a curriculum that fosters both spiritual growth and academic development.

The objectives of education under Muslim principles include spiritual development, promoting a deep understanding and practice of the faith, as well as moral and ethical training grounded in Islamic teachings. Additionally, these principles aim to provide a foundation for scientific and humanitarian academic development, with a focus on critical thinking and problem-solving strategies, alongside motivating students towards a spirit of solidarity and active community participation. However, while these objectives emphasize intellectual and social development, the traditional teaching methods, particularly in Sunni schools, rely heavily on memorisation and recitation, especially regarding the four schools of thought (Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali). In contrast, Shi'ite schools place greater importance on the history and teachings of the Shi'ite imams and Ahl al-Bayt, promoting debates on social justice and martyrdom.

Griffin (2011) criticises the rigidity of formal curricula, arguing that the heavy reliance on mechanical memorisation and standardised assessments limits students' ability to

⁵³ A written record of Muhammad's oral communications, reports and advice that are not included in the Qur'an, reported by various narrators with legal and religious backgrounds, analysing historical facts about the prophet's life and work. In Bukhari, M. I. (2009). *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Darussalam Publishers.

engage in critical thinking, creativity, and more meaningful learning. While these traditional methods remain central in many Muslim educational settings, there is a growing push to integrate modern alternatives, including new technologies, which can bridge the gap between the traditional emphasis on religious knowledge and the promotion of critical and creative thinking.

It is therefore necessary to develop new strategies that better respond to local realities, with non-formal education emerging as an alternative for fairer and more equitable social transformation. Non-formal education refers to structured learning that takes place outside the formal school system, typically organised by community groups or religious organisations, focusing on practical skills, social development, and civic participation. However, in some cases, Muslim non-formal education programmes tend to follow a similar curricular structure to that of formal education, despite offering greater flexibility to adapt to local social needs.

Peace education, provided by Islamic religious organisations, is based on training young people in social responsibility and peaceful coexistence. Thus, in the study of the Qur'an, the recitation and memorisation of passages on peace, justice and compassion, and the interpretation of verses related to conflict resolution, reconciliation and peacebuilding are valued. Fiqh⁵⁴ is one of the main themes in the peace education of the Muslim faith, enhancing students' understanding of the practical application of Islamic law, teaching the principles of justice (Adl - fairness; Ihsan - excellence and benevolence; and Sulh - reconciliation), conflict resolution (mediation and arbitration) and ethics (Ahkqlaq - morality; and social responsibility). Human rights are also a key topic, though they are interpreted through the framework of Sharia law, which encompasses principles such as:

- Preservation and protection of the Islamic faith, but also defends religious freedom through tolerance and the protection of places of worship of other religions;
- Preservation of life, which implies the safety and dignity of every individual, prohibiting murder and unjust violence;
- Preservation of the mind, with the purpose of safeguarding mental and intellectual capacity, thus prohibiting the consumption of illicit substances, including alcohol, and motivating its faithful towards education and a desire for knowledge;

⁵⁴ Islamic jurisprudence related to ethics, social justice and conflict resolution.

- Preservation of property, guaranteeing the protection and right to private property, prohibiting corruption, theft or fraud. At the same time, it seeks a fair redistribution of wealth and the obligation of Zakat (obligatory charity);
- Preservation of honour, prohibiting defamation, slander and actions that take away human dignity or damage its reputation, thus promoting mutual respect;
- Preservation of offspring, promoting the ideals of marriage and family, thus ensuring the continuity of the human specie;

In addition to the above themes, the curriculum for (non-formal) peace education in the light of the Islamic faith also promotes exercises in self-knowledge and introspection, training young people in empathy, compassion and peaceful conflict resolution. The promotion of intercultural and interreligious dialogue encourages shared projects by young people from different backgrounds for the well-being of local communities, promoting non-violent communication and active listening, assimilating the common problems between different faiths, thus deconstructing some prejudices about the "other".

In more entrenched Lebanese localities, given the multiculturalism and tensions that exist, dominant groups can see peace education (non-formal environment) as a threat to their cultural and religious identity, resisting the implementation of these programmes in their territories and making it difficult to create safe spaces for sharing, in addition to the lack of funding for these activities. So, once again, the strategies involve training educators in the local difficulties, and involving community and religious leaders, enticing them with opportunities to share their knowledge with the "other", through incentives such as generous dinners, donations to their projects...

Lebanon shares some success stories in peace education through non-formal educational programmes, with the Imam Sadr Foundation standing out, inspired by the life of the moderate Shiite Imam al-Sadr⁵⁵, who has developed various educational projects in southern Lebanon, minimising the suffering of the poorest, orphans, victims of war, including Palestinians. This foundation seeks to create the conditions for consolidating a culture of openness, dialogue and reconciliation, improving access to equal

⁵⁵ As well as founding schools and charitable organisations, he is also the founder of the Amal Movement (the largest Shiite political party and military militia, founded in 1974), which is home to 13 Hezbollah seats out of the 16 won in parliament in the May 2022 elections. During the Civil War (1975 - 1990), he was reported missing in 1978 after a meeting with President Gaddafi in Libya.

opportunities by including the most disadvantaged, empowering the role of women in education and creating community peace centres. After the 34-day war in 2006, the *Imam Sadr Foundation* organised holiday camps for more than 330 children affected by the war, promoting peace education through theatre, singing, sport and intercultural dialogues, in which children and young people had the opportunity to share their stories and express their fears, deconstructing prejudices that fuel discord. Considered a success story, UNICEF subsequently supported more holiday camps, encouraging children to express their dreams and fears through art, crafts and games, acting in the background for teenagers and young victims of war, as volunteers and facilitators of activities, minimising post-war trauma and stress.

Another example in the field of non-formal education for peace is the *al-Makassed Philanthropic Islamic Association*⁵⁶, founded in 1878 by the Sunni philanthropist Mohammad Taher Haji Bakri, with the aim of empowering society through education. According to *al-Makassed Philanthropic Islamic Association*, the association's successful programmes include the regular organisation of mediation and conflict resolution workshops, which enable participants to address disputes peacefully within their local communities through simulated conflict situations. Additionally, the association invests in interfaith dialogue programmes that bring together young people from diverse backgrounds, helping to deconstruct prejudices through shared topics of interest, ultimately leading them to engage in local community projects and fostering a sense of cooperation and solidarity. Furthermore, as highlighted by Sari (2015), *al-Makassed* also provides education programmes focused on global citizenship and human rights, while promoting female empowerment through leadership and vocational workshops.

Beit El Yateem (Druze Orphanage), founded in 1927 by Druze judge Aref Beik Al Nakadi, not only takes in orphaned children, allowing them to stay until they are 20, but also promotes formal and non-formal education, health care, and social activities such as theatre, musical concerts, and conferences. While many institutions suspended their activities during the Civil War (1975-1990) due to insecurity and lack of resources, *Beit El Yateem* continued to care for child victims of the conflict, providing them with essential support. In the field of non-formal education, it promotes conflict resolution programmes that cover theories of mediation and negotiation, non-violent communication, and supervised mediation practices. Projects aimed at inter-religious

⁵⁶ Site <https://www.makassed.org/>

dialogue facilitate meetings between young people and community initiatives, incorporating topics such as the history of religions, principles of tolerance and respect, and techniques for respectful and productive dialogue. Furthermore, initiatives focused on psychosocial support and emotional development enable participants to enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence through group therapy sessions. As noted by Sari (2015), such programmes play a vital role in fostering social cohesion, while UNICEF (2018) highlights the importance of these institutions in providing educational opportunities and emotional support to vulnerable children in conflict-affected areas.

The *Alawite Islamic Charitable Association* (AICA) was founded in 1972 by the politician and leader of the Alawite community, Ali Eid⁵⁷. To prevent religious extremism and build a culture of peace, this association runs non-formal conflict resolution programmes that teach mediation techniques and effective communication for the peaceful transformation of conflicts. Additionally, it promotes community service activities and peace initiatives, involving young people in projects that foster social cohesion in local communities. As highlighted by UNESCO (2018), "community-based organizations play a critical role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, offering training and support that empower local actors" (p. 45). This aligns with the work of the AICA, which actively engages youth in constructive activities aimed at strengthening community ties. Furthermore, Sari (2015) discusses how such organizations contribute to social cohesion and the promotion of dialogue, essential elements for creating a harmonious society.

As with other associations, interreligious dialogue is seen as an effective tool in building a culture of peace, with regular meetings with young people and cultural activities to enhance mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. Faced with the influx of Syrian refugees in northern Lebanon, AICA has also provided a great deal of support in alleviating suffering, implementing non-formal education programmes for young Syrians, who generally don't have access to regular schools. This includes literacy and numeracy classes, language courses and practical skills for integration into everyday life in the country. In response to the trauma suffered by refugees in the face of violence, psychological support and emotional development sessions and peer support group dynamics are offered, providing an opportunity to share experiences and minimise trauma. Despite partnerships with NGOs and international agencies (UNICEF and

⁵⁷ Founder of the Arab Democratic Party (ADP) in 1974 and of the Syrian-backed Arab Red Knights militia. The militia was the subject of some corruption-related controversies in the 1980s and was accused of encouraging clashes in northern Lebanon, with arrest warrants having been issued for its members at the start of the Syrian Civil War (2014). In the 2022 elections, it did not win any seats in parliament.

UNHCR), during my experience in 2017 supporting the integration of refugees in poor areas in Akkar, I encountered many difficulties, not only because of the limited resources, but also because of the local cultural and social barriers, taking into account the Syrian occupation of the country (1976 - 2005), which fuelled various prejudices and stereotypes between Lebanese and Syrians.

In short, non-formal education initiatives based on Muslim faith and principles emphasise values such as justice, compassion and solidarity, and are fundamental to building a culture of peace. When the authenticity of these values is put into practice, radicalisation and extremism tend to be reduced, because the prevention of religious extremism begins in educational contexts, where children and young people have the opportunity to develop moderation and rationality, and are able to create sincere and respectful dialogue, resisting and questioning the processes of radicalisation and religious extremism.

1.2.3. Non-formal education based on the Christian faith

Lebanese Christian schools, whether Maronite, Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, combine the national guidelines of the Ministry of Education with Christian values, messages and teachings, seeking a holistic education characterised by morality, spirituality and academic excellence. In this sense, the school curriculum encompasses the basic subjects (history, social studies, maths, Arabic, geography, physical education, foreign language...) but also religious education. In addition to being a subject area, the latter⁵⁸ it is also developed through extracurricular activities such as spiritual retreats, involvement in youth groups or Christian movements, community charity projects and active participation in liturgical celebrations.

Once again, the challenges in the area of education are a reflection of the country as a whole, with religious diversity, the socio-economic crisis and regional conflicts being an obstacle to school success, despite various integration and psychosocial support strategies. And although schools like Collège Notre-Dame de Jamhour (Jesuit) or Sagesse High School (Maronite) encourage non-formal education programmes, collaborating with NGOs and even DLR (Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation),

⁵⁸ Bible studies (understanding and interpreting the New and Old Testaments), Christian Doctrine (fundamental theology, Christian morality and sacraments), Church History (history of Christianity, church hierarchy and the impact of martyrs and saints on the Christian faith), Interreligious Dialogue (knowledge about other religions or religious traditions and dialogue initiatives with teenagers and young people from different religions) and Moral and Civic Education (human rights, citizenship and universal values).

opportunities often don't reach other young people, due to economic difficulties or geographical location, given the elitism of these educational institutions. On the other hand, Christian schools are currently facing numerous economic difficulties due to the influx of wealthy Lebanese families emigrating in search of better opportunities for their children, given the context of insecurity.

Fahed (2012) argues that "economic disparities and the lack of adequate resources in poorer areas contribute to the perpetuation of the cycle of violence and exclusion", and that it is necessary to develop more inclusive educational projects, reducing the discontent of community divisions that fuel conflict (p.71). Thus, the flexibility of non-formal education, both in its curriculum and in its location or timetable, can reach a larger and more diverse audience, capable of sharing knowledge and strategies to reduce extremism, increase social cohesion and build a culture of peace. In general, non-formal education activities developed by Christian organizations in the context of education for peace, frames the importance of interfaith dialogue and tolerance by organising workshops or seminars on the history and culture of religions and religious denominations, analysing case studies and success stories, visiting places of worship different to their faith, thus contributing to mutual understanding and cooperation between individuals from different backgrounds. Another essential point is human rights education, making national and international legislation and the rights of ethnic-religious minorities known. Theatres and dramatisations alert the public to the importance of winning their rights, showing and analysing cases in which human rights have been violated.

The approach to mediation and conflict resolution sessions is a fundamental component for training young people in non-violent conflict resolution strategies. These sessions enhance skills in communication, negotiation, and empathy through simulation games and constructive debates. Organizations such as *Fighters for Peace*⁵⁹ have documented these activities, demonstrating their effectiveness in fostering peaceful interactions among youth. Their reports indicate that such programmes not only improve conflict

⁵⁹ Fightes for Peace is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting peace and conflict resolution in contexts of violence and tension. Founded by former combatants and young leaders, the organization aims to transform narratives of confrontation into stories of cooperation and reconciliation. Through training programs in mediation, conflict resolution, and interpersonal skills, Fightes for Peace empowers youth to become agents of change in their communities. The organization also focuses on activities that foster interfaith dialogue and build bridges between diverse groups, promoting sustainable peace and social inclusion. In <http://fightersforpeace.org/>.

management skills but also promote a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives in communities.

In addition, there is a strong emphasis on leadership development and youth empowerment, which contributes to creating a more sustainable future in positions of influence. This empowers young people to actively engage in deconstructing prejudices within their communities, invigorating community projects and mentoring sessions that advocate for a culture of peace.

To strengthen social ties among diverse community groups, the history of Lebanon and the formation of its communities are also explored. This contextual understanding helps young people become more aware of their surroundings and aims to create small pockets of social transformation that favour peaceful coexistence and social cohesion. According to *Fighters for Peace*, such initiatives have proven effective in promoting social harmony and mitigating conflicts in the region, demonstrating the positive impact of youth-led efforts in building a more inclusive society.

Lederach (1997) points out that building a culture of peace often involves the ability to accept risk, to face difficulties and the fear of failure, and to have the courage to get involved in the complexity of human relationships. Against this backdrop, numerous challenges arise, related to mistrust, insecurity, sectarian and political tensions, and limited human and financial resources for the implementation, maintenance and expansion of non-formal education programmes for building sustainable peace. Often, the difficulties also stem from the lack of recognition of non-formal programmes on the part of official schools, and their importance is often overlooked.

Within the Orthodox Christian faith, the *Orthodox Youth Movement* plays an important role in non-formal education, having been founded during the Second World War (1942) by Archbishop Georges Khodr with the aim of reviving the Orthodox faith among young people. Through youth meetings, spiritual retreats, workshops related to conflict resolution, and community volunteering programmes, the association has promoted interfaith dialogue, youth leadership, and peace education. With the start of the Syrian Civil War (2011), northern Lebanon, particularly Tripoli, became a focal point for sectarian tensions between Alawites and Sunnis, leading to episodes of violence and conflict between 2015 and 2016, which increased mistrust and insecurity in the region (UNICEF, 2018). The *Orthodox Youth Movement* organized interfaith events aimed at reducing tensions and building bridges between the conflicting groups. It also sought to

promote non-formal educational programmes to build a culture of peace, sharing conflict resolution and leadership strategies, using summer camp activities and community work to assist displaced families traumatized by violence. Youth involvement in these activities not only provided purpose for those losing hope but also helped counter the influence of extremist groups such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and Jabhat al-Nusra⁶⁰, which sought to recruit disaffected young people (Sari, 2015).

Caritas Lebanon, a catholic organization linked to the international Caritas Internationalis network, was founded by the Archdiocese of Beirut in 1972, carrying out its mission to help the most disadvantaged on the eve of the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted 15 years. During this period, *Caritas* supported displaced families, providing medical and social assistance and building temporary shelters. It promoted education programmes, providing psychosocial support to children traumatised by the violence and rehabilitation programmes for victims of the war. Through the institution's international network, it has carried out advocacy campaigns in favour of peace and reconciliation, showing the world the fragility of the situation and the urgency of international support for an end to hostilities. With regard to non-formal peace education programmes and the prevention of religious extremism, *Caritas* currently promotes peace education and conflict resolution workshops, using the same strategies as other institutions, improving communication, mediation and negotiation through principles of non-violence, focusing these initiatives on Beirut, Tripoli and the Bekaa. In these regions, with the exception of Beirut, youth empowerment and leadership programmes are also promoted, addressing issues of human rights and civic training, seeking social cohesion capable of resisting extremist ideologies. In refugee camps in the north of the country and in the Bekaa, educational support is offered, focussing on basic education, psychosocial support and peace education, continuing the studies of children and young people and contributing to a sense of normality and prospects for the future. Interfaith dialogue sessions are held all over the country, deconstructing prejudices, increasing tolerance and interfaith cooperation.

World Vision Lebanon emerged in the country at the start of the Civil War in 1975, based on Protestant Christian principles and in unity with the Baptist Church. Linked to its international network, this NGO has carried out significant humanitarian work since its

⁶⁰ A jihadist organisation linked to al-Qaeda, it emerged in 2012, shortly after the start of the Syrian Civil War, with the aim of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's regime and establishing an Islamic state under Sharia law. It is recognised as a terrorist organisation by the European Union, the United States and the United Nations.

presence in the country, providing medicines, food, and shelter to communities affected by the war. In the post-war period, it has been involved in rebuilding educational infrastructure and has been particularly active in the last decade (during the Syrian Civil War) by expanding its programmes for Syrian refugees, improving local community development networks, and implementing peace education and social cohesion programmes in regions most affected by the influx of refugees.

Regarding peace education programmes, World Vision has been running workshops, seminars, and community-based activities designed to provide tools for interreligious understanding, critical thinking, and conflict resolution techniques. According to the World Vision Lebanon Annual Report 2020, these activities have engaged over young people, significantly enhancing their capacity to navigate complex social dynamics and fostering a culture of dialogue and respect among diverse groups. It is important to note that while these activities can be described as extracurricular, they are structured to engage youth outside of traditional school settings, fostering practical skills applicable in their communities.

At the same time, the organization develops resilience and social cohesion projects, encouraging young people to participate in community service and youth leadership activities. The report highlights that these initiatives have not only empowered young leaders but also created a supportive environment for those who have experienced trauma due to conflict. Vocational programmes also offer the most disadvantaged individuals in refugee situations the opportunity to learn about entrepreneurship, financial management, and business development, equipping them with essential skills to improve their livelihoods. In recent years, World Vision has done crucial work in conflict-affected areas, promoting social cohesion and peace while reducing vulnerability to the lure of extremist propaganda, despite challenges centered on insecurity, mistrust, and economic incapacity. Overall, the 2020 report underscores the impact of these initiatives in fostering social harmony and mitigating conflicts in the region.

Since 2004 in Lebanon, Danmission, an evangelical Lutheran organisation, has been working in the field of non-formal education for peace, creating conflict resolution and non-violent communication dynamics with young people and adults. The focus is also on inter-religious dialogue, promoting understanding and mutual respect between people from different backgrounds, as well as creating youth empowerment strategies, enabling young people to become ambassadors for peace. With regard to the prevention of religious extremism, awareness campaigns are developed, alerting individuals to the

consequences of extremism and also training religious leaders to promote messages of peace and tolerance among their faithful. Danmission also develops community initiatives, challenging different ethnic-religious communities to work together to solve common problems, such as supporting the most vulnerable populations (refugees, internally displaced people, disadvantaged families...).

In short, Christian organisations promoting non-formal education for peace and the prevention of religious extremism have played a very important role in building a culture of peace, focusing on inter-religious dialogue, youth empowerment and community involvement. It's important to note that Christian institutions co-operate with each other, regardless of their religious traditions, because limited resources and political and economic instability encourage them to share the same stage to achieve common goals.

1.3. Secular peace education organisations

Secular education in Lebanon plays an important role in society in promoting peace and preventing religious extremism, overemphasising religious neutrality and focusing its approach on universal values. However, this neutrality can also often make initial intervention difficult in more entrenched communities, due to the lack of support from religious leaders, who usually facilitate the building of bonds of trust between those involved and the target audience in the first instance. Another argument has to do with the prejudice that secular education devalues religious customs, resulting in tensions between the educators or facilitators and the local community. To counter this trend, a balance needs to be struck between respect for religious traditions and safe spaces for sharing and education. However, the secularisation of education can bring young people from different backgrounds together without the predominant judgement of a single faith, although the facilitation of this process depends very much on the religious interpretation of each individual, which can lead to more radical or moderate tendencies.

Secular schools center their curricula more on human rights, global citizenship, morals and ethics, civics and democracy, and usually exclude records or episodes from religious sources. Unlike Christian or Muslim schools, which prioritise students who share the same faith, secular schools are more inclusive, accepting students from different backgrounds, favouring multicultural understanding and social inclusion, although there are still difficulties in implementing secular educational programmes in a country with a deep history written between religious divisions and violent conflicts.

Among several institutions, *Adyan Foundation*⁶¹, founded in 2006 by academics Nayla Tabbara and Fadi Daou, stands out for its multifaceted work, encompassing cultural, educational, social and spiritual dimensions, creating bridges of dialogue and shared humanity, reaching out to young people, religious leaders, educators, academics and Lebanese communities. To this end, Adyan promotes various educational initiatives, focusing on interfaith dialogue, citizenship education and the prevention of religious extremism. In addition to research, it also organises events, workshops and forums, involving local communities in moments that promote cooperation and dialogue, seeking to build sustainable peace and mutual respect. The Adyan Foundation (2018) emphasises that education is an essential tool for combating religious extremism, and that it is important to confront students in the classroom, including themes in the school curriculum, to raise awareness of the appeal, arguments and consequences of radical and extremist propaganda. At the same time, it is increasingly important to involve the community in this process, so that a sustainable support network can be developed to identify and anticipate signs of extremist tendencies and minimise their consequences. The fact that non-formal education is more flexible in its curricula, seeking effective solutions for local social diagnosis, also incorporates more attractive methods, breaking with traditional pedagogy. Thus, innovation is provided in the sharing of knowledge and strategies, using social networks, which often involve influencers to spread messages of peace and diversity, educational videos and online campaigns, increasing the target audience to be intervened. In a face-to-face context, the strategies involve group dynamics in safe spaces for sharing, using attractive games, thus favouring a learning environment that facilitates respect, tolerance, friendship and social cohesion, without the conditioning of religious doctrine.

The Dawaer⁶² Foundation is a non-profit, non-partisan NGO set up in 2015 by a group of activists with the aim of promoting a democratic and peaceful society, centring its values on human rights. Its intervention focuses on the education and empowerment of children and young people, strengthening their resilience in the face of adversity, developing critical thinking and awareness. Dawaer seeks to develop strategies for social stability and inclusion through educational programmes, mental health and media literacy, given the amount of information offered by the media, which is often transformed into disinformation or *fake news*. With regard to media literacy, Dawaer

⁶¹ It means "religions", emphasising the complexity of the Arab world's belief system.

⁶² It means "circle" in Arabic, opening up an idea of openness or "invitation" (da'wa). In site <https://www.dawaerfoundation.org/>

has strengthened local civil organisations and activist groups, spreading campaigns that promote reconciliation and reduce hate speech. A code of conduct was developed to respond immediately to the emergence of fake news and hate speech, sensitising the community to the risks and rise of extremism.

Another interesting project in this area, with the support of UNESCO, was the creation of a media literacy club. Five schools were chosen, encouraging teachers and students to create their own clubs, producing media content in defence of human rights, developing a platform for self-expression and mutual understanding. New Media Youth selected and trained 50 young people in this area, motivating them to conduct interviews via social media in order to assess community needs and youth priorities. As a result, awareness-raising videos and leaflets were produced, alerting the population to the emerging reality of the Akkar area, home to one of the country's largest refugee camps, Tel Abbas.

As part of its Protection programmes, Dawaer offers psychosocial support to children and young people through games and art therapy, reducing the social stigmatisation of mental fragility, promoting self-esteem, independence, personal goals and personal growth. At the same time, it develops projects in the field of positive parenting, preventing maladjusted behaviour between parents and children, providing tools for a healthy transition from childhood to adulthood. Given the rise of social networks in young people's lives, cyberbullying prevention programmes are also carried out, making teenagers aware of certain dangers, and educational sessions are also promoted to prevent school and community bullying. In this sense, there is careful work in the field of inclusive education, seeking simultaneous interventions with the various educational agents, students and family members, in order to work together in the same direction. Because its values are based on secularism, the communication dynamics give priority to inter-community and inter-sector dialogue, strengthening local cooperation networks. This programme therefore aims to empower young people as protagonists in mediating and resolving conflicts peacefully in their communities.

2. Dialogue For Life and Reconciliation (DLR)

Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR) is a Lebanese non-profit non-governmental organization that actively promotes inter-religious dialogue and reconciliation. What sets DLR apart is its dedicated focus on creating meaningful connections between young people from diverse backgrounds and religious leaders across various denominations. By facilitating structured dialogues and collaborative projects, DLR fosters mutual understanding and respect, addressing the roots of sectarian tension in Lebanon. This

emphasis on reconciliation and dialogue not only helps to bridge divides but also empowers youth to become advocates for peace within their communities, making DLR a crucial player in the landscape of social harmony and coexistence in Lebanon.

The organisation took its first steps in 2008, carrying out some dynamics with young people. In 2010, it was registered as an NGO and, in March 2011, it set itself the goal of creating a sense of spiritual solidarity, providing safe spaces for dialogue with activities for self-knowledge and mutual knowledge between individuals from different backgrounds and religions, deconstructing stigmas, prejudices and stereotypes. DLR is an independent and apolitical organisation whose mission, values and activities reflect its impartiality.

As already mentioned, Lebanon has a rich and dynamic culture, full of diversity. However, diversity doesn't always show its best side. That's why DLR focuses on creating a safe ground where people, especially young people, have the chance to get to know each other, with their differences and similarities. A place where they can share and understand each other, as well as learn about the dignity of being different. The idea was born not only as a means of preventing future conflicts, but also as a concern of the founder, who realised that although young people spent time together, they rarely got to know the places where their peers of other religions or ethnicities lived, which fed prejudices and stereotypes that made reconciliatory dialogue difficult. Various strategies were therefore developed to promote a rapprochement, increasing awareness of how the "other" lives, what their aspirations are and strategies for achieving them. Although more sensitive topics are put on hold to avoid social friction, DLR promotes various activities in which young people have the opportunity to recognise themselves in the other, discovering that they share many common goals, especially the ambition to make their country fairer and more peaceful.

In other words, Lebanon's diversity is seen by DLR as a source of wealth and not as a barrier to dialogue and coexistence. Given the nature of Lebanon's social life and the way it is enmeshed in its political life and history, this NGO deals with issues of civic engagement and the participation of minorities and women in the national system. To this end, various information campaigns are carried out on the various religions and their ramifications, in order to help combat stereotypes and prejudices and achieve sustainable long-term results.

DLR believes that breaking down religious barriers allows for the full civic involvement of young people, women and the various cultural groups that form part of the social

fabric. This contributes to the resurgence of a Lebanese civic identity, creating a sense of solidarity between the different Lebanese cultural groups. In this context, DLR seeks to create an environment that promotes dialogue and cooperation between the different religious denominations, where young people can overcome their prejudices and stereotypes and be more active in collective civic life. Believing in the power of young people, DLR seeks to make interfaith dialogue a priority for them.

Among the different activities for young people, the *Interreligious Academy* has been running since 2009, similar to a summer university. For a fortnight, young people attend lectures and take part in workshops that raise awareness of other religions and cultures, culminating in debates and dialogues that are important for active participation and the exposure of individual and collective perceptions. These moments of sharing contribute to an effective rapprochement between young people from different social, cultural or religious backgrounds, challenging them to work together on civic actions (painting walls, organising a theatre, rebuilding part of a house). Sharing in these actions not only develops civic participation, but also builds conscious friendships through the pedagogy of the heart, allowing them to share moments together during significant religious periods such as Christmas or Ramadan. In addition, they are encouraged to carry out actions in their schools or universities, trying to recruit new members and develop a sustainable network for dialogue, cooperation and reconciliation. This initiative has been growing over the years, from both Christian and Muslim traditions. Many hundreds of young university students have benefited directly from these activities, maintaining good contact with DLR. However, given the current situation, it has not been possible to renew this dynamic in recent years because of the lack of financial support, given the economic crisis aggravated by the influx of refugees, the years of the pandemic and the explosion of the Port of Beirut.

Among the various activities for young people and children, the *Let's Play* project also stands out, in which four Muslim and Christian schools were selected to develop solidarity and coexistence among young people through sport, essentially football. In the first phase, the Christians played against the Muslims; in the second phase, they were encouraged to create mixed teams to develop a sense of co-operation. While the teenagers focused on the goal of winning the match, DLR gradually achieved the goal of creating a sense of mutual help and team spirit, regardless of their origins. Through this initiative, it was possible to develop sustainable solidarity and co-operation, giving the students the opportunity to make friends through sport.

Shadow Ambassador was a project carried out in Lebanon, Bosnia and Albania, and the aim was to create a space for young people to meet and accompany bridge-builders in the field of dialogue and reconciliation. These "ambassadors", as we called them, were religious leaders, peace activists, ex-combatants, among others. The aim was also to improve access to knowledge and positive information through the telling of personal testimonies and practical learning.

Following the explosion in the Port of Beirut in 2020, DLR developed a new project, *Operation Hope*, to alleviate the suffering of those most affected by the consequences of the disaster. Various fundraising mechanisms were set up to rebuild the homes of some of the families within its reach, once again putting young people from different backgrounds to work together on a path of solidarity and co-operation. All these common goals of mutual aid have not only contributed to building peace and sustainable dialogue, but have also helped to counter the narratives and propaganda of violent and religious extremism. In response to the socio-economic crisis, aggravated by the explosion, the *Emotional and Educational Support* project emerged, in which several volunteers came together, dedicating a few hours a week to providing school support to the most disadvantaged children and teenagers, through the online platform Zoom. This project not only has a positive impact on the acquisition of knowledge necessary for school success, but also promotes active listening on the part of the tutors, resulting in psychosocial support for these young people. Given the cultural and religious diversity, there is often initial resistance to showing certain emotions; however, this active listening can recognise signs of extremist ideological empathy in teenagers, allowing them to anticipate and deconstruct its development. Basically, this programme often combines emotional and educational support, responding to the holistic needs of children and young people, promoting psychological balance and intellectual growth.

In short, DLR's main objectives are to promote and give credibility to the dignity of being different, to develop strategies for reconciliation, to establish an inter-religious dialogue centred on young people, to create methods for the peaceful management of cultural and religious diversity, to promote actions for cultural exchange aimed at peacebuilding, and to provide emotional and educational support to disadvantaged children and young people.

On the basis of the various activities described above, DLR has made a significant contribution to drawing up strategies capable of helping future generations to build a

more peaceful and just society, while at the same time making young people aware of the risks and enticements of radical and extremist propaganda.

2.1. Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders

After several experiences with young people, it became necessary to create community initiatives that would align the discourse of religious leaders with youth aspirations, since the religious rhetoric of some leaders regularly ran counter to the work carried out by DLR with young people. "Resistance to change is often found in the depths of fears and uncertainties, where entrenched identities and past experiences become anchors that make it difficult to navigate new realities" (Lederach, 2005, p. 75). In this sense, in order to prevent young people from becoming internally conflicted between two types of discourse - on the one hand, the deconstruction of prejudices and stereotypes promoted by DLR and, on the other, the affirmation of ethnic-religious identity delivered in homilies or sermons - DLR realised that it was important to take careful action with religious leaders.

So, in the autumn of 2016, more than thirty spiritual leaders from the north of Lebanon came together under the slogan "Unity in Diversity", with the aim of developing projects that are more visible and accessible to the population of the north. This idea was initially discussed at a two-day workshop held in the spring, where spiritual leaders from various confessions, including Sunni, Alawite, Maronite and Orthodox, along with a scientific committee of academics, came together to address the issue of extremism and the lack of cultural knowledge in the north. After an in-depth debate, it became clear that it was crucial to move forward with a project where moderate religious leaders could meet their peers and, in most cases, their neighbours, from different backgrounds and religions. Over the course of several sessions, the religious leaders themselves had the opportunity to show their point of view by sharing some training sessions with the other leaders, thus building bridges for sustainable dialogue on a path towards reconciliation.

By creating this solid network, the aim was to encourage the exchange of experiences and knowledge between religious leaders, showing them that they are not alone in their moderate approach to the practice and interpretation of religion. In addition, it was important to show that by being connected and working together, we could more effectively prevent the escalation of clashes and reduce extremism among young people.

With these objectives in mind, the project sought to divide the participants into five teams, each made up of members from different backgrounds and communities, and a

representative of the previously established scientific committee. These teams worked together to plan, organise and execute the project in different areas of northern Lebanon. Each team was given responsibility for a specific area and target group, so that they could develop a project tailored to the needs of that audience. The target groups included secondary schools (assigned to two teams), university students, local NGOs and future religious leaders. During these months, various workshops, seminars and training sessions were held, focussing on combating extremism and discussing how to use spiritual culture to build rather than destroy. These sessions discussed, among other things, the concepts of "dialogue" and its different levels, as well as "diversity" and the dignity of being different.

By developing this extremely innovative and unique project in one of Lebanon's most challenging regions, marked by recent wars, it was possible to overcome stereotypes and build interactive bridges between different communities. During the project, a safe space was created where participants could meet, dialogue and come to an understanding about a common role to strengthen young people's resilience against extremism. As well as providing this space, confidence was also transmitted to religious leaders, empowering them to make a difference. Participants realised the importance of "investing" in each other and sharing a common cause that was previously seen as exclusive to each side.

The results of this project were not only reflected in the number of participants involved or the young people we reached, directly or indirectly. They also manifested themselves in the continuing work of this strong and united team of religious leaders, who continued to meet after the project ended, committed to positively influencing young people. These leaders recognised the importance of breaking down stereotypes and promoting spiritual solidarity through dialogue, with the aim of overcoming conflicts, improving mutual understanding and valuing dignity in diversity.

During the peaceful demonstrations against corruption that began on 17 October 2019, this network of religious leaders stood out for their joint presence, dismantling the idea that it is religious differences that divide them and fuel conflicts. This message was crucial in reducing the religious space exploited by extremists, as well as demonstrating that corruption, greed and unbridled ambition for power are the real causes of discord in the country.

The *Sustainable Religious Leaders Network* has played a key role in rebuilding dialogue and trust, as well as reducing the propaganda that the wars in Lebanon were caused by

religious sectarian rivalries. In addition to a peaceful coexistence between the various religious communities becoming increasingly visible, it has also been possible to observe the birth and growth of a spiritual solidarity, which "recognises the richness and authenticity of the other's spiritual experience and is translated by the inclusion and sharing of the other's experience" (Fahed, 2020, p. 2). Recognising that dialogue is the first step towards mutual understanding, this sense of spiritual solidarity helps the individual to place the other in their prayer through an intuitive awareness, showing concern for the "other" regardless of their beliefs or background. We can understand spiritual solidarity as a deep and meaningful connection between individuals or groups that goes beyond religious, cultural and ethnic differences, recognising and valuing the spiritual experience of the other. This form of solidarity promotes a feeling of unity and co-operation based on mutual respect and the sharing of spiritual experiences. In essence, true solidarity emerges from empathising with and understanding the experiences of others, turning oppression into a collective consciousness of liberation. This must be built on the inseparable dichotomy of "leadership for the people" and "people for leadership", developing "through the genuine witness of leadership, in a humble, loving and courageous encounter with the people" (Freire, 2013, p. 136).

In short, the *Sustainable Religious Leaders Network* focuses on the main objectives:

- Encouraging inter-religious dialogue between different religious leaders for the sake of mutual understanding and respect;
- Strengthen leadership skills for recognising, mediating and transforming conflicts;
- Promoting community co-operation through development projects for peace;
- Raising awareness about the impact of religious leaders' discourse on a path to peace and reconciliation;
- Developing a sense of spiritual solidarity, sharing and recognising the authenticity of the spirituality of the "other".

Among the many advantages of this project in Tripoli, a region with many sectarian tensions, after many workshops, meetings, joint meals and community work days, several advocacy campaigns for peace and reconciliation have resulted, which have contributed to resolving tensions and conflicts in the region, strengthening community ties and promoting peaceful coexistence.

The Feast of the Annunciation (25 March), a bank holiday on which Christians and Muslims share this religious occasion, because for Christians this date symbolises the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, announcing that she would conceive Jesus, and for

Muslims, Mary is a character venerated in the Qur'an for her virtue, purity, faith and the miracle associated with the birth of Jesus. Mary is an inescapable character among Christians and Muslims, and is described more often in the Qur'an than in the Bible, with an entire chapter or surah (Maryam, 19th surah) describing the importance of faith, obedience to God and reverence for prophetic figures. In this scenario of the *Sustainable Religious Leaders Network*, the "joint celebration of the Annunciation not only strengthens ties between religious communities, but also serves as a powerful testimony of spiritual solidarity and mutual respect" (Fahed, 2020, p. 62). Thus, this date not only marks a powerful example of interreligious dialogue, demonstrating the importance of the example of religious leaders, but also peaceful coexistence between the faithful of different religious traditions, highlighting the acceptance of differences and the importance of continuous dialogue.

3. Pedagogy of the Heart and Education for Consciousness

Building on the themes of inter-religious dialogue and community cohesion discussed in the previous sections, this section explores the crucial role of emotional and affective dimensions in education. In the context of genuinely welcoming Jewish refugees during the Second World War, Frère Roger de Taizé (2004) wrote that "there is no greater love than to go to the extremes of ourselves" in search of peace of heart (p. 130). This statement invites us to understand the metaphor of our heart in a different light, balancing Descartes' famous phrase that marked Western philosophy, "I think, therefore I am," with the variation "I feel, therefore I am." In this balance, the emotional and affective dimensions emerge as essential elements of human experience and learning, underscoring that fostering empathy and understanding among diverse groups is not only a goal of dialogue but also a foundational aspect of cultivating a peaceful society.

It is in this sense that Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Heart" (2000) seeks an educational model that builds bridges and offers alternative paths to holistic learning. This model allows students' identities to be rediscovered and recreated, balancing intellectual progress with emotional, ethical and social development. Freire argues that society is hypnotised by growing technology and capitalism, which "demands that free happiness be replaced by what can be bought and sold", alienating people from social interaction (p. 26). Despite this, he recognises the importance of technology when geared towards a better quality of life. The proposed pedagogical approach aims to cultivate values such as empathy, compassion, solidarity, mutual respect and social responsibility in a welcoming and positive educational environment. This gives new meanings to the knowledge

received and felt, making students more participative and active citizens, capable of promoting a social transformation towards peaceful coexistence.

For Freire (2000), the metaphor of the heart in education symbolises the human dimension, which plays a crucial role in connecting with others, in solidarity in times of resistance and submission, and in the search for social transformation based on justice and compassion. Social transformation depends largely on the social construction of reality, where human consciousness and the perception of reality and knowledge are moulded and mediated by society, linking heart, conscience and reason. According to Luckmann and Berger (2010), reality is "a quality belonging to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition" (p. 13). Volition is linked to the ability to make conscious choices and act on those choices, exercising free will. Therefore, an education that prioritises this narrative is fundamental so that immediate impulses are mediated by an individual and collective conscience focused on peaceful coexistence, respecting the limits that increase tensions and disagreements that cover up the reasons for conflict.

For Luckmann and Berger (2010), the social construction of reality takes place in three stages: externalisation, where individuals create symbols and meanings through social interaction, forming shared cultural patterns; objectification, which incorporates and institutionalises the symbols created; and internalisation, which absorbs objectification, making it part of individual consciousness and attributing new meanings to the world, influencing identity, values and behaviour.

In a context marked by refugees, internally displaced people and those who try to keep their possessions and conquests at all costs, Paulo Freire's (1979) pedagogy of conscience can play a crucial role in moulding thought and liberating people from oppression through critical thinking and creative solutions. From this perspective, the education must go beyond the simple transmission of knowledge, instilling in students a restlessness that arouses interest and curiosity, developing critical thinking that allows them to reflect on their role and responsibility in society. Freire (1979) advances the concept of consciencialisation to "conscientisation", which implies going beyond the "spontaneous sphere of apprehension of reality" to a "critical sphere, where reality becomes a knowable object and man assumes an epistemological position" (p. 15). Conscientisation" is therefore an active process of understanding and transforming reality, which involves a dialectical practice between action and reflection, overcoming the intellectual quality in favour of a way of existing and interacting with the world.

This awareness-orientated pedagogy encourages students to reflect on their beliefs, prejudices, values and stereotypes, as well as on the social and cultural institutions that shape their lives. Education for "conscientisation" allows us to look at justice, peace and social transformation with a moral imagination capable of drawing up new plans and solutions for an ever-changing world. For Lederach (2005), moral imagination is a powerful tool in conflict transformation, as it develops empathy and recognition of the importance of humanity, facilitating processes of communication and mutual understanding. As well as understanding the perspectives of others, this ideology promotes creativity to imagine a better future for all those involved in the conflict, restoring strategies to build dignity, integrity, justice and peace.

In order to advance towards freedom, it is essential not only to review our starting point, but also to project the reference of where we want to go. Thus, stimulating "conscientisation" can develop a moral imagination that favours a turning point, transforming conflict into a path to peace. The turning point corresponds to a crucial moment when the destructive dynamics of the conflict begin to shift towards signs of reconciliation, demonstrations of empathy or changes in leadership rhetoric. Identifying these moments is crucial to intervening and promoting a reconciliatory dialogue with a view to sustainable peace. It is necessary to take risks without being certain that the strategy designed will work. Risk is a mystery that requires travelling an unknown path, where heart, courage, willingness and commitment are fundamental to this journey of resilience and perseverance.

In short, education that articulates the heart and conscience in favour of firm decisions for sustainable peace is an indispensable strategy in conflict contexts. Partial learning on these occasions, characterised by immediate survival, can feed extremist and radical ideologies that perpetuate violence and prolong conflict. On average, wars today last around twenty years, which is far too long to leave positive and peaceful stimuli in abeyance. Therefore, quality education with educators who are sensitive and aware of the short- and long-term social consequences is crucial for transforming conflicts and building sustainable peace.

Thus, the role of NGOs like *Fighters for Peace*, the *Dawaer Foundation*, *Adyan Foundation* and the *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR)*, in facilitating non-formal education activities becomes crucial. These organizations provide the necessary frameworks and support systems that not only address immediate educational needs but also foster emotional and social skills essential for conflict transformation. Quality

education, delivered by educators who are sensitive to both the short- and long-term social consequences, is vital for cultivating resilient communities. By integrating inter-religious dialogue and practical conflict resolution strategies into their programmes, these NGOs promote initiatives that foster understanding and collaboration among diverse groups. By equipping young people with the skills necessary to navigate complex social dynamics and empowering communities to engage in constructive dialogue, these organizations contribute significantly to building sustainable peace in conflict-affected areas, ultimately addressing both immediate needs and long-term peacebuilding efforts.

Conclusion

Non-formal education, in addition to enabling a more flexible and adaptable approach to emerging needs, also allows for the integration of pedagogical practices that value lived experiences, creativity and active participation, which are often considered secondary in the formal education. Thus, projects related to community initiatives and social intervention manage to bring young people together in activities around various community benefits, improving the channels of peace and reconciliation, while acquiring fundamental skills of empathy, solidarity, mediation and assertive communication for sustainable social cohesion.

Spiritual solidarity is a vital tool in the pedagogy of the heart, providing a sense of community and empathy that goes beyond religious and cultural differences. Lebanon's ethno-religious diversity brings together a national identity, built between conflicts and tensions, and it is important to counteract the cycles of sectarian divisions based on religious differences. In recent years, NGOs have played a key role in promoting peace and reconciliation through non-formal education, using innovative strategies to foster understanding and cooperation. As Freire's pedagogy of the heart states, it is important to follow an educational path that balances intellectual progress with emotional, ethical and moral development. On the basis of conscientisation, it is possible to transform oppression into a collective consciousness of liberation, empowering individuals to critically reflect on the surrounding reality. This continuous process aims to go beyond the simple acquisition of knowledge, directing the individual towards an education of love, courage, humanisation and emancipation.

As the object of this study, *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR)* is an example of transforming tensions and conflicts by promoting genuine intercultural and interreligious dialogue, building bridges of reconciliation between young people from different backgrounds and religious leaders. Projects such as the Interreligious Academy

or the Sustainable Religious Leaders Network demonstrate how non-formal education can be effective in deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes, promoting spiritual solidarity and co-operation for a culture of peace.

Thus, the pedagogy of the heart, anchored in spiritual solidarity and awareness, offers a solid basis for education aimed at peace and reconciliation. It is increasingly important for education policies to recognise and integrate the strategies and advantages of non-formal education, supporting initiatives that promote dialogue, mutual understanding and cooperation between different groups. Through the examples of some NGOs based in Lebanon, it was possible to verify the importance and positive impact of non-formal education in building a more peaceful and harmonious society, demonstrating that education is a powerful tool for social transformation, especially in scenarios of tensions, conflicts and ethno-religious diversity.

CHAPTER IV

Empirical Study: Strategies of Research Methodology

1. Introduction

This study employs a qualitative empirical approach, focusing on a case study conducted in Lebanon, to explore the role of non-formal education as a tool for peacebuilding and the prevention of religious extremism. The case study investigates how non-formal education can act as a catalyst for reconciliation and social cohesion in contexts marked by vulnerability to conflict and religious diversity.

The research reflects the complex social and cultural dynamics of Lebanon, a country that faces profound challenges due to its history of conflict and religious tensions. The methodology combines qualitative thematic analysis with a critical reflexive autoethnographic to capture the perceptions and experiences of participants involved in non-formal education initiatives, revealing how these educational practices contribute to the deconstruction of prejudices and stereotypes, as well as mitigating the spread of extremist discourses.

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology used in the thesis, including the research design, the epistemological foundations underpinning the analysis, the methods of data collection and analysis, as well as the criteria for selecting participants. Additionally, the ethical considerations involved are discussed, along with the limitations faced throughout the process. The justifications for the various methodological choices are presented in line with their relevance to the research question and the overall objectives of the study.

2. Empirical Study: Questions and Objectives

This empirical study seeks to address the central research question: “How can non-formal education, anchored in solidarity in contexts of adversity and vulnerability to conflict, reduce religious extremism and promote reconciliation towards a culture of peace?”

To answer this question, the following primary and secondary objectives have been established:

| Main objectives | Specific Questions |
|---|--|
| Identify the factors that produce and reduce violent extremist discourse, minimizing its spread through specific behaviours among young people. | <i>What are the factors that produce and reduce violent extremist discourse, and how can its spread be minimised through specific behaviours among young people?</i> |

| | |
|--|---|
| Determine the role of solidarity, cooperation, and reconciliation in building peace in religiously diverse societies vulnerable to conflict, using non-formal education. | <i>What role do solidarity, cooperation, and reconciliation play in building peace in religiously diverse societies vulnerable to conflict, using non-formal education?</i> |
|--|---|

Figure 14 - Main Objectives

| Secondary objectives | Specific Questions |
|--|---|
| Explore strategies that may reduce the vulnerability of younger generations to risks such as manipulation, grooming, and forced recruitment by extremist groups, based on awareness-raising and education. | <i>What strategies can reduce the vulnerability of younger generations to manipulation, grooming, and forced recruitment by extremist groups through awareness-raising and education?</i> |
| Analyse how non-formal education can contribute to a culture of peace by mitigating the risk of school dropouts and promoting interfaith dialogue for harmonious coexistence. | <i>How can non-formal education contribute to a culture of peace by mitigating school dropout rates and promoting interfaith dialogue for harmonious coexistence?</i> |

Figure 15 - Secondary Objectives

3. Justification of the Methodological Option

In studying the contribute of non-formal education, peacebuilding, and the prevention of religious extremism in Lebanon, this thesis adopts a qualitative case study approach, integrated into sociological frameworks that explore social and cultural dynamics in contexts vulnerable to conflict and the role adopted of DLR to minimize.

In this sense, the methodological approaches adopted were designed to capture the experiences and perceptions of the participants through qualitative research, with the case study providing an in-depth analysis of the educational practices promoted by the NGO *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation* in Lebanon. Additionally, the use of Critical Reflexive Autoethnography helped to understand the social realities observed and how these interactions contribute to building sustainable peace, thus expanding the scope of the study.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach within the phenomenological-interpretative paradigm, prioritising the understanding of social constructions, particularly religious discourses that influence individuals in attributing new meanings to symbols, which may foster extremist intentions. As Merriam & Tisdell (2016) point out, qualitative research is essential for understanding how individuals perceive their experiences, construct their realities, and attribute meaning to those experiences. In the context of this research, qualitative methods are particularly relevant for analysing the development of religious extremism, as they allow for a deep exploration of the contexts and meanings associated with language and symbolism, and how these can be deconstructed to foster peace.

The research employed a holistic and ideographic analysis, recognising that religious phenomena are experienced and constructed through symbols perceived by the senses and attributed to the mind, where something beyond human existence is acknowledged. As Flick (2018) emphasises, qualitative research focuses on the social construction of realities, especially through participants' perceptions and their everyday practices.

To complement this, the study integrates elements of critical reflexive autoethnography, which situates the researcher's personal experience within a broader sociocultural and political framework. Autoethnography is defined as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.6), allowing for a nuanced exploration of lived experiences as sites of cultural and structural analysis. In its critical reflexive form, this approach not only describes but also interrogates the ways in which individual narratives reflect and contest power dynamics, inequalities, and social structures (Reed-Danahay, 2017). This aligns with Ellis's (2011) argument that research should be a politically and socially conscious endeavour, as well as with Denzin's (2014) advocacy for an interpretive paradigm that links biography with cultural critique. Furthermore, it incorporates Bourdieu's (2008a) concept of *self-analysis*, which underscores the necessity of situating the researcher within the field of study to critically examine the intersection between subjective experience and objective social structures. By embracing this methodological stance, the study ensures analytical rigour while maintaining reflexivity, positioning the researcher's narrative as both a lens and an object of inquiry in the broader sociocultural context.

By combining thematic analysis with critical reflexive autoethnography, this research explored individual and collective experiences of peacebuilding models aimed at preventing the spread of violent religious extremism. Triangulation was employed to examine the phenomenon from multiple angles, thereby enhancing the reliability and depth of the research findings (Willig, 2008).

3.2. Research Strategy: Qualitative Case Study

The selection of a qualitative case study as the research methodology for this study is justified by the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon being investigated: the role of non-formal education and religion in building peace and preventing religious extremism in Lebanon. According to Yin (2009), the case study is an empirical inquiry designed to examine contemporary phenomena within their real-world contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined. In Lebanon's case, characterised by significant cultural and religious diversity, the case study allows for an in-depth analysis of the social and cultural dynamics that shape peacebuilding and efforts to prevent religious extremism.

This research adopted an exploratory case study approach, which is especially suited for investigating phenomena that have not been extensively studied. Focusing on the NGO Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR), which promotes peacebuilding through non-formal education sessions aimed at deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes, the case study method provided an opportunity to explore in detail how these educational practices influence the mitigation of religious extremism and the promotion of a culture of peace.

As Yin (1981) highlights, the case study methodology is particularly effective for capturing the complexity of real-world phenomena, offering a deeper understanding of how educational models are applied in specific social contexts. This is reinforced by Pais (2007), who states that "social reality does not exist unless it is interpreted," stressing the importance of interpretation in analysing social interactions. Critical reflexive autoethnography was also a crucial component of the research, offering the researcher a more nuanced view of the context by allowing for real-time observation of practices and interactions. This method, as noted by Quivy & Campenhout (2005), enables the researcher to foresee and address practical issues that may arise in the field.

The case study approach was key to understanding how non-formal education and religion can contribute to preventing religious extremism in Lebanon, a context marked

by both diversity and tension. By examining the phenomenon within its real-world setting, this methodology allows for a detailed investigation of the interaction between key variables—education, religion, and peacebuilding—and their influence on one another. This dynamic is particularly important in Lebanon, where historical conflicts and a confessional system of governance have shaped social structures and relationships.

As Merriam & Tisdell (2016) note, the qualitative case study is an ideal method for capturing participants' interpretations and the meanings they attribute to their experiences, with the researcher acting as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. This methodology is, therefore, well-suited for examining social and cultural interactions in the Lebanese context, where education and religion play pivotal roles in shaping identities and mediating conflicts.

Furthermore, the case study facilitates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon within its specific context, which is crucial for exploring how non-formal education and religion contribute to preventing religious extremism. Although some critics have expressed reservations about the generalisability of case study results, scholars such as Saldaña (2011) argue that the true value of case studies lies in their ability to provide in-depth, contextually rich analysis. This depth of analysis offers valuable insights for both theory-building and practical peacebuilding initiatives in similar conflict-prone environments.

In this research, the exploratory case study approach allowed for an investigation of a phenomenon—non-formal education's role in preventing extremism—that has not been extensively explored within its specific cultural and religious context. As a result, the methodology not only supports a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon but also provides a foundation for the development of effective peace education strategies tailored to the unique socio-cultural dynamics of Lebanon.

[4. Sociopolitical Context of Lebanon](#)

Lebanon's complex sociopolitical landscape is marked by latent conflicts and underlying tensions that shape the everyday lives of its citizens. During my fieldwork in Beirut, I observed the reality of extreme poverty, the presence of young soldiers on alert, and public demonstrations reporting disappearances and kidnappings. These observations culminated in a personal encounter during a seventh-day mass of a senior figure in the Christian Lebanese Forces Party, who had been kidnapped and later killed by Syrian refugees with links to militias. My interaction with his family and the broader narrative

of this tragic event provided crucial insight into the urgent and volatile realities that define Lebanon's silent conflict.

Although physical hostility is not always evident—except in the southern regions—the underlying tension manifests through passive-aggressive behaviours and a lack of open communication, which hampers the resolution of conflicts. As Galtung (1990) posits, conflict does not need to be overtly violent to exist; it can remain latent, forming what he terms "structural violence," where oppression and inequality persist without open confrontation. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of symbolic violence complements this view, suggesting that power relations and domination are maintained subtly, through non-physical means. In Lebanon, silent conflict reflects this symbolic violence, where unresolved tensions simmer beneath the surface, perpetuating inequality and mistrust.

4.1. Context of the Study and Selection of Participants

Following this broader sociopolitical context, the selection of participants for this study was guided by their direct involvement in peacebuilding initiatives through non-formal education. The study was carried out in Lebanon during the month of April 2024, considering its religious and cultural diversity, through the non-profit NGO *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation* (DLR). Since 2010, DLR has been promoting interreligious dialogue and interactive bridge building reconciliation between young people from different backgrounds and religious leaders from different denominations. The organisation's moto is believing and promoting the dignity of being different and create a sense of spiritual solidarity by offering safe spaces for dialogue, self-knowledge and exchange between individuals from different backgrounds and religions, with the aim of deconstructing stigmas, prejudices and stereotypes, towards a reconciled reality.

Initially, it was planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with eight religious leaders in the Tripoli region, four Christians (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic) and four Muslims (Sunni, Shia, Alawite and Druze), to explore their perspectives on the origins of the conflict and extremism, as well as on building a culture of peace, solidarity and reconciliation from their actions and communication with their faithful. However, due to the instability in the region, it wasn't possible to meet with everyone individually, so semi-structured interviews were carried out with an Orthodox priest, a Sunni imam and an Alawite imam. To compensate for the lack of some initially projected data, conversations and dialogues in an ethnographic context were considered, gathering information and opinions from a Maronite priest, founder of the charity "Cuisine de Mariam", and meetings with an Armenian Catholic priest, days after the

memorial of the 109th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. Moments were also shared with the Deputy Director of the Oriental Institute of Beirut, the regional director of Danmission - Middle East and an interview with the President of *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation*.

Originally, it was planned to collect data through two semi-structured *focus* groups: one with eight young people who took part in DLR's educational sessions; and another with six facilitators of these sessions. However, due to the new dynamics of the NGO, anchored in the latent insecurity and lack of resources caused by the socio-economic crisis, it was decided to collect data through interviews with three tutors of educational and psychosocial support sessions, and four teenagers who benefit from these measures. In addition, thanks to involvement in classes at the Department of Religion, Culture and Philosophical Studies at Notre Dame de Louaize University, under the guidance of co-supervisor Dr Ziad Fahed, it was possible to understand the aspirations of several university students for change in the country, reflecting on the origins of the conflict, the role of religion in peace-building and the steps needed for reconciliation between young people from different ethno-religious backgrounds.

4.2. Data Collection Techniques

For data collection, this research used a combination of qualitative techniques, selected on the basis of the specificities of the Lebanese context and the participants involved, and aligned with an epistemological approach underlying the study.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main data collection technique with religious leaders and the founder of *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation* (DLR). This method was selected for its ability to deeply explore the perceptions and experiences of the interviewees, allowing for a detailed understanding of the meanings they attribute to their lived realities, namely the religious issues and discourses that can shape a path towards peace or the growth of religious extremism, given the entire Lebanese context, from the constant crises to the parallel interests of political corruption. My prior connection with DLR, established during my earlier experiences in Lebanon, was instrumental in facilitating a deeper understanding of the subject and in building trust with participants. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility, allowing the researcher to adjust the line of questioning as necessary to capture the complexity of the topics covered. This approach is particularly valuable in a context such as Lebanon, where religious and cultural issues are intrinsically complex and multifaceted (Willig, 2008, p. 23).

The relevance of semi-structured interviews is also based on their ability to facilitate dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee, allowing both to actively participate in the construction of knowledge. This technique allows the researcher not only to collect data but also to understand how religious leaders and other participants interpret and construct their worlds, offering insights into the role of religion in building peace and preventing religious extremism. It is important to note that, in order to carry out the interviews with religious leaders, an interpreter fluent in Arabic was required. This role was assumed by the co-supervisor, not only for linguistic accuracy, but also because of the trust and respect he already enjoyed among the religious leaders. In a context marked by silent conflict and heightened sensitivity, his presence functioned as a symbolic bridge, facilitating access and fostering a climate of confidence, particularly given that the researcher was initially perceived as an outsider. His involvement was strictly limited to the role of interpreter, ensuring a faithful and objective collection of the participants' responses. To safeguard ethical considerations and guarantee freedom of expression, the co-supervisor was not present during the focus group interviews, which were conducted exclusively by the researcher. The main topics covered in the interview guide included issues such as the role of religion in peacebuilding, the challenges faced by religious communities, and perspectives on preventing religious extremism, all of which are detailed in the interview guide provided in the annex.

As a complement to the semi-structured interviews, focus groups were organised at two different times: one with the tutors of the "Emotional and Educational Support" programme and the other with the teenagers who benefit from this Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR) initiative. Focus groups are a valuable technique for capturing the dynamics of interaction between participants, allowing for a richer and more in-depth discussion. This method makes it possible to obtain a diverse range of perspectives on complex issues, such as the impact of non-formal education on deconstructing prejudices and promoting peace. The key topics addressed during the focus groups included participants' experiences with non-formal education, their perceptions of prejudice deconstruction, and the role of education in fostering reconciliation. These topics are detailed in the focus group guide provided in the annex.

As Willig (2008) argues, the *focus group* "is really a group interview that uses the interaction between the participants as a source of data". (p. 31) The group dynamics that emerge from these sessions can reveal both convergences and divergences in opinions, which is essential for understanding how different social actors perceive and respond to

the conflict context in Lebanon. In addition, the researcher acts as a moderator, guiding the discussion and ensuring that all participants have the opportunity to express their opinions, while observing the interactions and the development of ideas (Willig, 2008, p. 30).

Participant observation was another key technique used in this study, allowing for the direct and immersive involvement of the researcher in the participants' activities. This technique provided an in-depth understanding of social and cultural interactions in the Lebanese context, capturing how individuals adjust their behaviour according to social and cultural expectations. Specific observations included the dynamics within educational sessions, interactions between religious leaders and participants, and the ways in which non-formal educational activities were organised and received by the community. Detailed field notes were taken throughout the observation period, documenting interactions, body language, and group dynamics. This approach was particularly useful for understanding how religious and educational practices shape and are shaped by the social realities of the participants.

Goffman (1993) emphasises the importance of considering the "self" of individuals and how it is incorporated into the different scenarios in which they operate. In this research, participant observation made it possible to record interactions in different environments, from the "stages" of religious leaders to the humbler backstage where young people carry out their activities in search of change. This approach allowed for a more complete analysis of social dynamics, offering valuable insights into how different contexts influence participants' behaviour and perceptions.

The data collected through critical reflexive autoethnography, semi-structured interviews and *focus groups* was complemented with a detailed analysis of secondary data, including an exhaustive review of existing literature on religion, education and peacebuilding, as well as analysing videos available on Youtube and social networks promoted by DLR. The integration of primary and secondary data allowed for robust triangulation, strengthening the study's conclusions and providing a more holistic view of the complex interactions between religion, education and peace in Lebanon.

The combination of these data collection techniques, carefully selected and adapted to the context and participants, ensures a rich and detailed analysis of the social and cultural dynamics present in the study. By utilising semi-structured interviews, *focus groups* and critical reflexive autoethnography, this research is well equipped to explore

the complexities of the interactions between religion, education and peacebuilding in Lebanon, contributing to a deeper understanding of the social realities shaping sustainable peacebuilding in the country.

4.3. Data Analysis

The WebQDA software was selected for this study due to its ability to manage and analyse large volumes of complex textual data in a systematic and organised way. Given the nature of the research (semi-structured interviews with religious leaders, focus groups with tutors and young beneficiaries, and the sensitive context of non-formal education in Lebanon) WebQDA provides the necessary flexibility to organise and interpret the data. This software not only facilitates the coding process but also allows for a thematic analysis approach, which is central to identifying key patterns in the data.

The choice of thematic analysis is justified by its ability to uncover recurring patterns in participants' experiences, which are particularly valuable for understanding complex social and cultural dynamics. Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun & Clarke (2006), offers a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. This flexibility is one of its major strengths, allowing it to adapt to various research paradigms, whether realist or constructionist in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

WebQDA supports this process by streamlining data organisation, enabling the researcher to engage with the data systematically. It assists in the coding process, grouping data into broader themes, and refining those themes throughout the analysis. Costa et al. (2016) highlight how WebQDA enhances the transparency and rigor of the qualitative analysis process, allowing for collaboration among researchers and ensuring that the themes identified are rooted in the participants' narratives. This software is particularly suited for studies involving complex cultural nuances, as seen in this research on non-formal education, peacebuilding, and religious extremism in Lebanon.

The thematic analysis in this study followed the six phases outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006):

- *Knowledge acquisition with the data*: This step involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and focus group discussions, allowing the researcher to become deeply acquainted with the data. Using WebQDA, this process was streamlined as it allowed the organisation of data segments and their categorisation into initial themes.

- *Generating initial codes:* The coding process began with the identification of recurring patterns in the data. The inductive approach was used to allow themes to emerge directly from the data, ensuring that the participants' voices were prioritised. Simultaneously, a deductive approach was applied to align the coding with the theoretical framework of the study, focusing on themes related to religious extremism, peacebuilding, and non-formal education. WebQDA facilitated this by allowing for flexible coding, revision, and management of codes, ensuring a thorough engagement with the data.

- *Searching for themes:* Once the initial codes were generated, they were grouped into broader themes. Themes such as extremism, solidarity, inter-religious dialogue, peacebuilding and educational practices emerged as key patterns in the data. The ability of WebQDA to visualise these themes made it easier to identify relationships between them, supporting a more nuanced understanding of the data.

- *Reviewing themes:* This phase involved refining the themes, ensuring they accurately represented the data. Themes were reviewed considering the research questions, ensuring their relevance. WebQDA's ability to automate parts of the coding process while maintaining transparency in the analysis helped to validate the themes constructed by "Tree Codes", putting extremism and peacebuilding in the top, exploring reasons to grow or prevent the phenomenon.

- *Defining and naming themes:* In this stage, the final themes were defined and named. The flexibility of WebQDA allowed the researcher to constantly refine these definitions, ensuring that each theme captured the complexity of the participants' experiences and the social realities of peacebuilding and religious extremism in Lebanon.

- *Producing the report:* The final phase involved compiling the results of the thematic analysis into a coherent narrative. The integration of WebQDA into this phase ensured that the final report was grounded in a transparent and well-documented analysis process.

The combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was crucial for this study, as it allowed both the emergence of unexpected themes and the testing of predefined concepts. The inductive approach provided insights into social dynamics that were not anticipated, such as the subtle influence of political corruption perceptions, symbolic violence in educational practices, silent conflict, while the deductive approach ensured

that the core theoretical concepts (religious extremism, peacebuilding, and non-formal education) were fully explored.

Through the thematic analysis, supported by WebQDA, the study was able to uncover how non-formal education in Lebanon can contribute to reducing religious extremism and promoting reconciliation. The flexibility of the software allowed the researcher to explore deeper into the cultural and social specificities of the Lebanese context, ensuring that the analysis was both contextually relevant and methodologically rigorous. As Costa et al. (2016) note, the capacity of WebQDA to facilitate a detailed and transparent analysis is particularly beneficial for studies involving sensitive and complex issues.

In conclusion, the integration of thematic analysis with WebQDA provided a robust framework for analysing the qualitative data in this study. The combination of inductive and deductive approaches allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, while the use of WebQDA ensured that the analysis was rigorous, transparent, and adaptable to the complexities of the Lebanese context.

4.4. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This research study, which involved collecting data through semi-structured interviews and *focus group* dynamics, was conducted with strict attention to ethical considerations, taking into account the fragility of the situation and the cultural diversity of Lebanon. The protection of the participants' personal data was a central priority, ensured by obtaining informed consent from all those involved. In the case of Religious Leaders, verbal consent was obtained, as requesting written consent could be considered offensive given their social status in Lebanese culture. Given the sensitivity of the topics covered - namely religious and ethnic-religious opinions and convictions - it was essential to ensure that the participants were informed about the aims and methods of the study, assuring them that they could withdraw at any time without any prejudice.

In the specific case of the *focus groups*, which included underage participants involved in educational and reconciliation activities promoted by the NGO *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation* (DLR), informed consent was obtained from parental guardians. This process ensured the full protection of minors' rights, guaranteeing that their participation was completely voluntary and conscious.

While conducting the interviews and *focus groups*, the researcher took steps to maintain an equitable relationship with the participants, eliminating potential power dynamics

that could influence the answers. The questions were structured in a way that allowed for flexibility, facilitating the detailed expression of the participants' opinions and perspectives. All those involved were clearly informed about the aims of the research, their rights to anonymity and the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time. Informed consents were obtained in advance for each stage of the process.

The researcher maintained a strict ethical stance throughout the analysis and presentation of the results, aware of his own previous experience and understanding of the Lebanese context, which could influence the interpretation of the data. The return of the results to the participants is also foreseen, ensuring that their contributions are recognised and valued, and that the results can benefit the communities involved.

However, this study faced several limitations, particularly related to the political instability and security conditions in Lebanon, which restricted the geographical scope of the fieldwork. The volatility of the socio-political situation created significant barriers to conducting interviews with religious and political leaders from various communities, due to the sensitivity of the topic and consequences of the economic crisis. To mitigate these limitations, an adaptive strategy was adopted that included spontaneous interviews and dialogues with different social actors, enriching the perspectives gathered and offering a more comprehensive picture of the reality of a country in "silent conflict", where latent tensions are manifested in daily interactions.

One of the most relevant interviews in this study was conducted with the founder of *Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation* (DLR), who also plays the role of co-supervisor in this research. Although his dual position raises potential ethical questions, his inclusion was justified by the importance and uniqueness of the data he provided. The founder of DLR has an insider's view of the dynamics of peace education in Lebanon and is a central figure in the implementation of initiatives that seek to reduce religious extremism and foster reconciliation in contexts of vulnerability and adversity. Additionally, his involvement in this research was instrumental in facilitating access to key participants, as well as in reviewing and validating the data collected throughout the study.

Recognising the potential for conflict of interest, various measures were implemented to ensure the integrity of the data collection. The interview followed a strict protocol, ensuring that the questions were objective and focused on the interviewee's experience and organisational work, without personal influences stemming from their role as co-

supervisor. The answers were documented in a transparent and systematic way, ensuring that the focus was on the professional and institutional aspects of DLR.

The information obtained in this interview was crucial to understanding the internal mechanisms of a peace education organisation in a context of social and religious fragmentation. The data provided is valuable both for developing a new perspective for understanding peace studies, which I have called the "social construction of the soul of peace", which I will present at the end of this research, and for analysing the effectiveness of non-formal education in reducing extremism. Due to the contextual circumstances and restricted access to other data sources, the interview with the founder of DLR provided information that could hardly be replicated by other participants.

Despite this, the possibility of bias inherent in the interviewee's relationship with the research is recognised. To mitigate this risk, the study complements the data collected with a detailed analysis of the existing literature on peace education practices in conflict contexts and triangulates the data obtained with direct observations of DLR practices and the results of previous projects. Additionally, focus groups and other interviews were conducted without the presence of the co-supervisor, allowing participants greater freedom to express their views openly. This approach strengthens the validity of the conclusions and ensures that the analysis is balanced and pluralised.

In short, the research was conducted in such a way as to ensure respect for the dignity and rights of the participants, while offering a valuable perspective on peace education in Lebanon, particularly in the context of DLR's role as a facilitator of social cohesion and reconciliation.

Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter has explored the methodological rationale behind the study on the role of non-formal education in building peace and preventing religious extremism in Lebanon. A qualitative methodological approach was adopted, recognising through a case study the complexity and sensitivity of the Lebanese context, characterised by significant religious diversity and a 'silent conflict' that profoundly influences the country's social and cultural dynamics.

The choice of thematic analysis as the main data analysis method is justified by the need to identify and interpret emerging patterns in the narratives of religious leaders, the founder and participants in the educational programmes of the NGO Dialogue for Life

and Reconciliation (DLR). This method enables an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of those involved, highlighting the crucial role that non-formal education plays in deconstructing prejudices and promoting a sustainable culture of peace.

The use of WebQDA software was justified as a tool ensuring methodological rigour in organising and interpreting data. Its use facilitated the researcher's role, enabling a systematic and contextualised analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, while respecting Lebanon's cultural and religious specificities.

Additionally, the ethical procedures adopted were discussed, with particular attention to protecting participants' personal data and respecting their religious and cultural convictions. Informed consent and anonymity were essential to ensure the integrity and reliability of data collected, particularly given the involvement of minors in focus groups.

The methodology of this study reflects a conscious and rigorous qualitative research approach, considering both the Lebanese context and the ethical and methodological requirements of a study that seeks to contribute to understanding and promoting peace in an environment marked by religious and cultural tensions. The chapter thus establishes a solid foundation for the subsequent data analysis, providing a clear overview of the tools and methods used to explore interrelations between education, religion and peacebuilding in Lebanon.

CHAPTER V

Critical Reflexive Autoethnographic Lens

1. Introduction

The exploration of findings in this study necessitates a methodological approach that acknowledges the researcher's role in the field. Given the complex socio-political and cultural landscape of Lebanon, it is crucial to reflect critically on the lived experiences encountered during the research process. This chapter presents a critical reflexive autoethnographic account, offering insights into the personal, ethical, and methodological challenges faced during fieldwork, as well as the interactions that shaped both the research and the researcher's understanding of peace education in fragile contexts.

Autoethnography, as conceptualised by Reed-Danahay (1997), bridges personal narrative with cultural analysis, positioning the researcher's lived experience as a lens through which broader societal structures and dynamics can be examined. By engaging in critical reflexivity, this chapter interrogates the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and interpretations, acknowledging the interplay between subjectivity and knowledge production. This approach not only situates the researcher within the socio-political realities of the field but also provides a deeper understanding of how non-formal education operates within contexts of religious diversity, insecurity, and latent conflict.

In addition to this reflexive account, this chapter introduces the fieldwork process, outlining the research setting, participant selection, and key contextual factors that influenced data collection. It explores the practical realities of conducting research in Lebanon, addressing logistical constraints, ethical considerations, and the dynamics of engaging with diverse stakeholders, including religious leaders, educators, and students. By examining personal engagement with the research setting, through daily interactions, observed resilience strategies, and moments of ethical or methodological complexity, this chapter aims to contextualise the fieldwork experience, providing both a personal and analytical foundation for the thematic analysis that follows.

This reflexive exercise and contextual overview serve as a critical prelude to the subsequent chapters, ensuring transparency in the research process and illuminating the intricate dynamics that inform the study of peace education in conflict-prone societies.

2. Fieldwork Context: A Critical Reflexive Autoethnographic Perspective

From the beginning of this research until today, geopolitical dynamics have been constantly changing, leaving Lebanese daily life in an untenable limbo, between a socio-economic crisis that seems to have no end and covert conflicts in militarily strategic

regions between Hezbollah and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). This places the country under a silent threat, not because of the absence of collective despair and the sound of bombs, but because of the sense of wanting to silence the pain and fragility, returning some sense of normality to the streets of Beirut.

Initially, the fieldwork was planned for November 2023, when tensions and conflicts between the IDF and Hamas escalated⁶³. Given the instability in the Middle East and the fragility of Lebanon as a neighbouring country, considered an enemy of Israel since the Civil War and vulnerable due to Hezbollah's interventions in northern Israel, the possibility of carrying out an critical reflexive autoethnographic analysis was continually postponed until there were better security conditions. So, after an Erasmus experience at the Eastern Mediterranean University (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus⁶⁴), I took the opportunity to head to Lebanon on 20 April 2024, albeit with all the silent limitations of security, since Iran led an official attack, as a nation, on Israel on the night of 13 to 14 April, followed by an Israeli retaliation in the early hours of 19 April on Isfahan, the third largest Iranian city.

It was in this context that I waited at Larnaca Airport (Cyprus), imagining and calculating the strategies for my research, its limitations and the uncertainty of the success or failure of my empirical study. So, the first description comes from Larnaca Airport, where I was able to observe various behaviours of the passengers who, like me, were on their way to Beirut. Among the normal atmosphere of farewells, there was the weight of young people travelling in military uniforms, and conversations about instability and insecurity in the country emerged amidst suspicious and cautious behaviour. While airports already bring together a dynamic set of attitudes and behaviours, with interactions between passengers, check-in staff, cleaners, catering workers and security agents, the routines of

⁶³ The conflict between Hamas and Israel began on 7 October 2023, after a terrorist attack coordinated by Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Islamic Jihad, on several Israeli cities, resulting in several hostages under Hamas control. This episode led to military action by the IDF in the Gaza Strip, which responded in an aggressive and inhumane manner, accounting for more than 40,000 deaths by July 2024.

⁶⁴ The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is recognised only by Turkey and is considered by the international community as an occupied territory of the Republic of Cyprus. Organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and most countries refer to the area as "northern Cyprus", without recognising the TRNC's sovereignty.

The division of Cyprus dates back to 1974, when a Greek-led coup seeking unification with Greece triggered a Turkish military intervention on 20 July 1974, leading to the occupation of the northern part of the island. In 1983, the Turkish-controlled region unilaterally declared independence as the TRNC, a status that remains internationally unrecognised, except by Turkey.

mistrust, fear and insecurity create a genuine daily experience in which solidarity also plays its part. In one of these episodes, an experienced man spoke to a young soldier, starting a dialogue about the fragility of security in the country, which resulted in an informative conversation for all those waiting at the boarding gate, as the silence of the other passengers gave way to ideas about the uncertainty of the country they were travelling to. At the same time, this gentleman not only demonstrated various behaviours of solidarity, but also shared his experience in the theatre of war in previous Lebanese conflicts. At the same time as there was a feeling of gloom, sadness at the repetition of history, he also showed confidence that everything would pass again, as they had already overcome many difficulties. At that moment, I recognised the resilience and hope of a people who had experienced it seven years ago, with the difference that in 2017, the crisis centred on the reception of Syrian refugees and all the implications that the Syrian civil war had on Lebanon, given its diversity and fragility.

Upon landing at Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport, the first sense of victory was felt, given the tensions and air military strategies, reassuring the jittery feeling of those travelling to Beirut, after the flight was initially delayed for security reasons. As a result of the prolonged economic crisis, the number of workers was low, and it took more than an hour to check passports, because considering salaries, there was no motivation to speed up services. Meanwhile, as far as security was concerned, it was more robust, also recalling the closure of airspace a week ago (14 April).

2.1. Memorial service for a Maronite Martyr

After leaving the airport, I headed north for a memorial service for Pascal Sleiman at the Monastery of Our Lady of Ilige⁶⁵ in Mayfouk - Byblos. Pascal Sleiman was a member of the Christian Lebanese Forces Party, having been appointed party administrator in the Biblos district. He was known for advocating a pragmatic and humanitarian approach, seeking to balance the needs of refugees with Lebanon's economic capacities and concerns. Between 2011 and 2016, there was an increase of 1.5 million Syrian refugees in the Lebanese population, which resulted in a worsening of economic, political, social and religious tensions, reflected in the reception conditions for refugees. This increase

⁶⁵ The Monastery of Our Lady of Ilige, located in Mayfouk, Byblos, Lebanon, is one of the oldest and most historically significant Maronite monasteries in the country. Founded in the 12th century, it served as the seat of the Maronite Patriarchate between the 13th and 15th centuries. Beyond its religious role, the monastery has been an important centre for spirituality and culture, housing manuscripts and Maronite sacred art. Situated in a mountainous region, it is renowned for its traditional architecture and devotion to the Virgin Mary, to whom it is dedicated.

directed immediate survival behaviour towards criminal actions, concealed by Syrian movements and militias, including the involvement of Hezbollah.

On the afternoon of 7 April 2024, Pascal Sleiman was ambushed and kidnapped by unidentified Syrian assailants. While some of the perpetrators have already been arrested, the leader of the group remains in Syria, with the Syrian government refusing to extradite him to Lebanon to face the judicial system. After the news spread, roadblocks were set up demanding his safe return. He was eventually killed, however, and his body turned up in Syria on 9 April. This sparked a wave of protests, with the Lebanese Christian population venting their anger at the Syrian refugees for days, even demanding that they leave the region of Biblos. The discontent of the Christian population led to an ultimatum to the Syrian refugees, ordering them to vacate shops and flats in the Bourj Hammoud area and in Ashrafieh (Beirut), with the leader of the Christian Lebanese Forces Party later calling for calm.

Despite the suspicion of Hezbollah's involvement in this criminal action, the Lebanese army, in collaboration with a Syrian army unit, arrested four Syrian nationals out of the eleven involved in the case. Although judicial sources attribute the act to a group of carjackers, the Christian parties claim that it was a political assassination, planned by Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, considering the latter's track record of silencing critics and opposition politicians. Issam Sharafeddine, the Minister for Displaced Persons, who

is affiliated to the Shiite Amal Movement party, has even called for the execution of the prisoners involved, giving the impression that he wants to eliminate any loose ends in the process that could be linked to Hezbollah.

It was in this context, a week after a funeral with significant numbers of the Christian community, that I took part in the seventh-day mass, absorbing the communal consideration of watching over the soul of a Christian martyr. Given my linguistic limitations, since the



Figure 16 - Manifestation of justice through a poster by Pascal Sleiman in Byblos.

Eucharist was prayed in Arabic and Aramaic, I decided to focus more on gestures and attitudes for an critical reflexive autoethnographic reading, despite having some translation at crucial moments. Until I reached Byblos, the roads were illustrated with posters of Pascal Sleiman, becoming a symbol of affirmation and popular yearning for justice, but also as another significant mark in the suffering of the Lebanese Christian community. On arriving at the scene, I was introduced to the family as a friend of my co-supervisor who is close to the relatives, and despite being a complete stranger, the welcome in the Maronite community was shrouded in gratitude and solidarity, not only for paying homage to the deceased, but also for religious identification, nothing else mattering apart from the fact that we shared the same faith.

The Monastery of Our Lady of Elige in Mayfouk is one of the oldest and most significant Maronite monasteries in the country, founded in the 13th century and dedicated to Our Lady of Elige, a name that derives from the Aramaic "Eel", meaning "God of the Gentle Valley". The architecture and location are stunning, not only because of the simplicity of the church without great ornamentation, but also because of the peace immersed in a picturesque landscape, surrounded by mountains, pine trees and olive trees, providing an atmosphere of serenity and spirituality.

Among the combination of oriental styles, with ancient and humble icons, people entered the church not only with sorrow for the situation and the years stolen from a family with three children, but also with gestures that reflected unity, communion, and solidarity, transporting faith to a scenario of forgiveness.

Days after the funeral, during the Christian community's uprising against Syrian refugees, Micheline Wehbe Sleiman, Pascal's wife, appealed for forgiveness in a news report, stating that the Christian faith seeks reconciliation and not violence. These words had a significant impact, marking a turning point in the Christian community's intentions to take justice into its own hands.

The mass marked the passing of a week since the brutal murder of Pascal, a victim of the tensions that have plagued Lebanon. The chants, sung in Arabic in quarter tones, were laden with sobs, tears and the comfort of a few hugs. The smell of incense, echoed at various times during the ceremony, directed the faithful towards veneration and sanctification, concealing a mystery shrouded in a solemn aura. If on the one hand the fragrance of incense symbolises Christian virtue, its smoke recalls the animal sacrifices and offerings recounted in the Old Testament.



Figure 17 - Icon of Our Lady of Ilige

In this way, Pascal Sleiman's death was interpreted in a certain way as a holocaust⁶⁶, and parallel speeches related to martyrdom emerged. The homily focused mainly on forgiveness and eternal life, restoring hope to the assembly and restoring some of the faith crushed by doubt and discouragement. At the same time, the priest tried to contextualise Pascal's death in the light of the Christian faith and the Maronite martyrs, in a place where for centuries he played a crucial role offering protection and spiritual support in times of persecution and conflict. With a more distant gaze, it was possible to observe the thoughtful movements of the faithful, with each gesture, such as lighting a candle, making the sign of the cross or the moment of the embrace of peace, carrying an unshakeable significance, expressed in the faces of sadness, resignation and spiritual hope. During communion, people move towards the altar, trying to bring their lives closer to God, but this act also symbolises communion between the living and the dead, in the hope of a future reunion embraced by the eternal life promised by Jesus. This idea takes us back to the origin of the meaning of the word religion, seeking to reconnect the living with the dead. At the end of the ceremony, the priest reinforced the Maronite people's sense of unity and resilience, eliciting emotional reactions expressed in silent prayers and almost inconsolable tears.

After the ceremony, there was a small procession to the tomb where Sleiman was buried, and between silent steps, filled with enormous sorrow, the explosion of pain and suffering took place at the tomb, with tears, audible weeping and the restraint, respect and solidarity of those watching the pain of the family and close friends. On the way back, the narrative followed a line of small dialogues in smaller groups, reflected in the impact of Pascal's death, but also in the vulnerability and insecurity of the country, reflected in the political, social and economic tensions. However, Micheline Pascal's words, in communion with the words of the homily, echoed over the mountainous landscape,

⁶⁶ From the Greek "holókauston" which means "sacrifice in which the victim is burnt alive" or "sacrifice by fire", and is interpreted as a sacrificial offering to God.

moulding the community's thoughts and actions, taking small steps towards reconciliation with God and with others.

After this more intimate process, there was a space for solidarity sharing and socialising in the parish centre, where people ate fruit or sandwiches and drank coffee, tea or water. During this time, I had the opportunity to meet the children and the wife, and I got a closer insight into the reality of the events. Despite the exhaustion expressed on the faces of the family members, the words that emerged showed their resilience and perseverance in the hope that everything can get better, although the absence of their father and husband will always bear the mark of the moments that were stolen from them prematurely. At the same time, there was a need to change the focus of the conversation, as if a breath of fresh air were urgently needed to distance the reality of pain and suffering. Thus, topics related to school, sport and hobbies began to emerge, restoring a little of the normality that existed before the tragedy.

In short, the seventh-day mass is not just a rite of passage, but also a collective expression of grief, spiritual solidarity, hope and identity. In this critical reflexive autoethnographic analysis, it was possible to understand how Maronites construct and negotiate meaning around adversity, using religious rituals to affirm their faith, identity and sense of community. The ceremony serves as a complex microorganism of resilience for a sectoral group, immersed in enormous cultural and religious diversity, intersecting the country's political situation with individual and collective ambition, clamouring for a social transformation that distances them from uncertainties, fears and insecurities.

2.2. Christian and Muslim neighbourhoods in the streets of Beirut

Like Cesário Verde, with his ability to capture the essence of the episodes of everyday life, with an almost pictorial precision describing detailed reality with clarity and vitality, I tried to wander around Beirut, describing the streets, the interactions, the beauty of the reflections and the fragility of human agitation, like the poem "the feeling of a Westerner" in a Middle Eastern city.

Walking through the streets of Beirut, you feel the weight of history and the fragility of the present day, even though you often feel the denial of a conflict in the south of the country, in order to restore a little normality to everyday life. However, given the various historical processes, the normative acceptance of everyday life is precisely this gloom and doldrums, shrouded in the fog of uncertainty. Christian and Muslim neighbourhoods are often distinguished by small religious symbols, demarcating territorial and identity

boundaries. Christian neighbourhoods such as Ashrafieh and Gemmayze reflect old buildings that transport us back to the French colonial era, oscillating on a timeline between moments of prosperity and others characterised by tensions and conflicts, visible in ammunition drilled into the walls of buildings. Nowadays, the survival of the markets is transfigured, putting the liveliness of the population on hold, which often waits for nightfall to reveal its liberation in bars and terraces with live music, clouded by the smoke and flavour of *shisha*. The night contrasts with the day, showing different ways of living and feeling Beirut, giving the sensation of living on the edge of *carpe diem*, before the war reaches the country's capital. The shadow of night lifts the veil of extravagance and wealth, putting extreme poverty to sleep in the streets, while rats scurry by. However, even those who make a more expensive living at night struggle during the day, hiding their fragility behind personal history and titles. Considering the fragile and corrupt system of generators that supply electricity in Lebanon, often the most prestigious hotels would switch on lights in several empty rooms at night to testify that the city is alive and tourism is on the rise, restoring a bit of normality to Beirut, when in reality you see groups of people staring at the starry sky, waiting for signs of rockets from Israel. There is no doubt that Beirut is a city of contrasts, once known as the "Paris of the Middle East", today it is just a trace of what it once was with enormous potential for what it could be.

Ashrafieh was the neighbourhood where I stayed and is considered one of the oldest and most charming in the capital, located to the east of the city. The streets of this neighbourhood mix tradition with modernity, oscillating architectural traces of the Ottoman empire with the French mandate, leaving a cosmopolitan trail that attracts people to visit the churches, religious and artistic centres. At the same time, you can also visit extravagant shopping centres with international luxury shops, which often contrast with traditional shops and local markets, creating a dynamic and diverse atmosphere. At the entrance to the street where I stayed overnight, there was an image dedicated to Our Lady, affirming the Christian identity of the area. At the same time, the many times I entered or left the street, I came across a group of muscular men with big beards, known as "Jnoud al-Rab", or Soldiers of the Lord. These radical vigilantes defend Lebanese and Christian patriotism, condemning LGBT and Islamic ideals, and emerged when crime against Christians began to rise, since the government has no money to ensure security in the neighbourhood. So, with an imposing posture, they take voluntary shifts day and night on plastic chairs or sitting on walls or pavements to ensure that there are no transgressions against Christians. However, their actions have also led them to attack

LGBT people gratuitously, as well as physically threatening LGBT nightclubs. Thus, despite its peaceful and prosperous appearance, Ashrafieh is not immune to the tensions affecting Lebanon, and is often the subject of conversation on security policy issues, demonstrating residents' concerns about the current situation of insecurity. However, life in the neighbourhood is marked by small gestures of solidarity and empathy, strengthening community ties that are capable of reinventing themselves in the face of adversity.

Moving on to Muslim neighbourhoods such as Hamra or Tariq el-Jdideh, the city reveals another facet, replacing churches with mosques and old bells with graceful minarets. Prayer times draw a new landscape, echoing the wavy chants in Arabic style, marking a sacred pause in the daily lives of the faithful. The street markets are marked by the colours and aromas of spices and the fast-paced movement of people. Driving circulates between traffic rules and the emergent needs of everyday life, crossing old, clumsy cars with big, exuberant brands. While children help their mothers wrapped in hijabs in traditional shops, men smoke shisha in cafés and play backgammon, in contrast to those who prepare shawarmas and kebabs in their commercial stalls. Once again, insecurity is felt through the displays of security, reflected in constant patrolling, mainly by the military militias who move around discreetly, leaving an aura of worry, fear and uncertainty, lowering the tone of trivial conversations, as well as topics related to the political situation.

Beirut's Downtown once again mixes historic architecture with modern features, where glass and steel business towers meet ancient mosques and churches. Throughout the area, you can still see the wreckage of the Beirut harbour explosion, as the government doesn't have the economic capacity to restore and rebuild state buildings like private ones. In this mix of social complexity, Roman ruins, Maronite, Armenian and Orthodox churches coexist alongside mosques, disputing which one is the tallest, or which one God or Allah answers prayers first. Downtown is the



Figure 18 - Martyr Square (Saint George Cathedral and Mohammad al-Amin Musk competing for the highest tower)

heart of the city, where the different communities and social classes meet, ranging from cafés and exquisite restaurants to small street markets and traditional shops, painting a canvas marked by the beauty of diversity. However, the scenery is also marked by the rutted streets, covered with young army soldiers, who await new orders while smoking their cigarettes next to armoured vehicles. Concern and adventure cover their faces, and conversations circulate around the spread of the war from the south to the capital, while they hold their weapons and point me in the right direction. Along the promenade where the Mohammad al-Amin Mosque is located, beggars can be seen on the roads, rented children selling tissues, Syrian refugees with babies on their laps begging, disabled homeless people lying on the ground, while business executives pass by with indifference and some tourists get off the Sightseeing Lebanon Tour buses.

As I cross the block, I see a small crowd of people with photographs and posters in hand, seeking justice for their relatives and friends who have disappeared, been kidnapped and perhaps killed. The journalists explore their stories, loaded down with reporting material, often holding their breath with every story they get, while the internal security forces supervise the scene.

Security is a constant concern in Downtown, not only because it is an area with greater economic power, but also because it is the centre of political life, given the location of parliament. As such, police patrols are constant, marked by frequent checkpoints, especially in areas close to embassies and government buildings. This excessive vigilance ends up demonstrating a social awareness of vulnerability to conflict and the fragility of peace, rather than a sense of security. This social painting externalises a diverse community that has grown accustomed to living in the uncertainty of conflict, becoming normatively accepted, in this tenuous balance between living a normal life and the notion that it is necessary to be prepared for possible crises, injustices or situations of violence.

Between Sahet Al Nejme Square, Martyrs' Square and the Beirut Souks, there are still bullet marks on the walls, reminiscent of the Civil War. There is still broken glass in hospitals and destroyed walls in homes, the result of the explosion at the Port of Beirut four years ago, with no answers from the courts and no accountability, reflecting the corruption of the elitists who rule the country. The partially destroyed grain silos still stand, reminding everyone of the tragedy of government irresponsibility, serving as a sombre memorial where poverty and injustice reign supreme.

In short, amid the security concerns and memories of war, there is a strange sense of normality as people continue their daily routines, engaging in cultural and commercial

activities and enjoying the vibrant nightlife. In the limbo of normality and latent tensions, the city takes on a dynamism all of its own, where resilience and perseverance are constantly put to the test. In a dichotomy of past and present, security and insecurity, conflict and peace, Beirut is a complex city in which every attitude and routine of daily life reveals the depth of the human experience in a context of constant adaptation and transformation, in search of a silent hope, in the tone of a living poem.

2.3. Mariam's Cuisine⁶⁷

With the destruction of several buildings in the Beirut harbour explosion, new actors emerged on the stage of generosity, solidarity and charity. In view of the vulnerable situation of the people who survived the tragedy, Maronite priest Hani Tawq began distributing water and food to the most disadvantaged people and to workers who had lost their livelihoods. Day after day and week after week, this epiphany grew, roughly fifteen minutes away from the site of the explosion. Between the support and the setbacks, the charity "Cuisine de Mariam", also known as "Mary's Soup Kitchen", was born and has played a crucial role in helping the most vulnerable in the context of a deep economic and social crisis.



Figure 19 - Cuisine de Mariam Mission

⁶⁷ Brief interview with the institution at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KI00lcNJ_w.

The main focus is to provide free meals to people in need, poor families, the elderly and other marginalised populations. These people can pick up their meal (lunch and dinner), but they can also eat on the spot, since many make their living on the streets and have no place to live. As well as providing meals, the centre also distributes clothes, medicines and financial aid in case of emergencies. Hani Tawq and his wife⁶⁸, are the cooks with the support of some volunteers, either serving or making food. Between charitable life and university teaching, in addition to material support, Fr Tawq also offers spiritual counselling and comfort in the face of suffering, acting on a stage of sublime solidarity, because as far as possible, among the volunteers who help in this mission, he also employs individuals with mental limitations and people struggling with their situation of prostitution, in support and service to others.

I had the opportunity to have lunch with him at his institution, which despite its pride in being able to serve around a thousand meals a day, the founder's humility places the whole work in Maryam's will, she being the symbol of divine providence, reflecting devotion to the Virgin Mary, a central figure in the Maronite faith. I decided to illustrate this space to confirm the resilience and readiness for change and necessity. Although the system of corruption is very visible, silencing people who want to make a difference and profiting from the spoils of conflict, the willingness to help begins right at the moment of misfortune. Lebanese solidarity manages to overcome religious differences, it manages to dream up new realities, just as the fingers of an *oud* glide over the strings, drawing out new melodies. The social and spiritual solidarity of Maryam's Cuisine seeks to write the relief of suffering, using Fr Hani's empathy for others. As we ate lunch, he told me how the project was born, the challenges and the providence that arose from financial, collective, individual and anonymous support. However, he only sat down at the table with me and my co-supervisor after ensuring that everyone had finished their meal, feeling the completion of his duty in one of the routine parts of the day. Between conversations about St Anthony, because before his gift of oratory was discovered, I learnt that in his first years in Italy after leaving Portugal, he worked in the kitchens serving his fellow Franciscans. This image seemed to put Fr Hani at ease, because until our time comes to nourish our souls, we need to nourish our bodies so that they are available to hope again. The beauty of gratitude and gratuitousness merges into new beginnings, where I realised that, with this charitable action, people have left the streets,

⁶⁸ In Eastern Catholic churches, such as the Maronite Church, parish priests are married, provided that the marriage took place before their ordination to the priesthood. However, when choosing a bishop, only those who have never been married can be considered.

overcome problems of prostitution and incorporated the dignity that is their due, strengthening their faith in times of adversity.

Maryam's Cuisine has become a significant example of community support that goes beyond simple food assistance. It represents a symbol of hope in Beirut, at a time of crisis exacerbated by the explosion, and is a magnificent example of how faith and community action can make a difference to the lives of the most vulnerable, regardless of religion or nationality.

2.4. Interfaith meeting at a private Christian school

On the last afternoon of my stay in Beirut, I had the opportunity to take part as a spectator in an interfaith meeting organised by a private Christian school. All the students were wearing school uniforms and were differentiated by gender. In the conversations between them, mixing English and French, there was a certain elitism in their topics, as well as in their ambitions. Some discuss going to university in the United States, while others decide on Europe, with France and England standing out as the main destinations. The perception is that the interest of the country they're going to takes precedence over what they want to study. At the same time, the school is very dynamic in its activities, with the teachers playing a leading role, along with the Jesuit priests who also teach some subjects. Even so, for an activity with so many well-known guests, the number of participants seemed low, as a result of the emigration of influential families, leaving several empty seats in the amphitheatre, where the conditions were being adjusted for the sharing to begin. While waiting for the guests, the scouts gave directions on where to go, where to park the cars and where to get something to eat. The scouts' well-distributed work reflected a comfortable and friendly welcome, characterised by smiles, hugs and warm gestures. The youth of that school permeated with a sense of transformation, feeling that they would later be the protagonists of change, whether in parliamentary seats, in religious pulpits or on the boards of non-governmental organisations or business systems. Despite the rootedness of the moral and Christian values taught in this educational establishment, the weight of the name and of the families will have a significant weight for those who are well led to strive for a little more.

The school is surrounded by large spaces, well-equipped classrooms and very pleasant break areas, among green spaces and tiled floors. After all the guests arrived, the talk began with an introduction by a Jesuit priest, emphasising the importance of the event and thanking all the participants for coming. Standing next to me were two 17-year-old girls, who helped me understand some points of the talk when the speakers only spoke

in Arabic. Once again, their willingness to help is genuine, but their elitism often makes them feel superior. Between several conversations we had, I realised that the school's dynamism led them to retreats, UN simulations, and a whole host of opportunities that promote democracy for peace, which unfortunately doesn't reach those who could also be the protagonists of change. "The central role of experience in learning also provides the basis for a democratic conception of education" (Branco, 2014, p.477). Genuine democracy is urgently needed in Lebanon, because although the confessional system is based on power-sharing in religious diversity, constant and visible corruption destroys this ideal, especially when those who want to speak out are silenced. The school shares knowledge, and knowledge is power, but if that power is conducted on a fine line where a little superiority stands out, the following generations will do nothing but endure the path taken so far.

Meanwhile, on the stage where the speakers were sitting, half-concealed by a long table, their speeches ranged from religious principles to the importance of dialogue in diversity. The religious leaders focused on the importance of peace, mutual understanding and the need for continuous dialogue, using biblical passages and passages from the Koran to support their arguments about the Lebanese social stratum and the fragility of the escalating conflict in the south. The audience listened attentively, demonstrating a respectful demeanour, although the perception was that this was already a common discourse in their school context, and they were not surprised by the rhetorical approaches. The state representative, trying to bring together the ideas previously expressed, emphasised the importance of the government supporting these initiatives, arguing that in the face of difficulties and cultural diversity, political measures seek to promote strategies for social cohesion. Finally, the academic perspective, personified by Dr Ziad Fahed, showed a critical and reflective vision, encouraging the new generation to meet the "other", strip away prejudices and stereotypes, and give themselves and others the opportunity to get to know each other, discovering the beauty of diversity. In a dialogue-oriented approach, he distinguished the five dialogues to overcome the fear of reaching the other shore: the dialogue of the hands (cooperation), the dialogue of the heart (dignity and beauty of difference), the dialogue of the mind (overcoming ignorance about the "other"), the dialogue of holiness (spiritual solidarity, joint prayer) and the dialogue of harmony (intersection between all the previous dialogues). This more distanced view, aware of the complexity of religious diversity, captivated the students more, as if within the topics usually discussed there was something new, a challenge and a goal that made them open their eyes and take risks.



Figure 20 - Gathering of Religious Leaders

Once the lecture was over, there was a time for sharing and a coffee break, during which the students mingled with the teachers, while the latter worried about the well-being of the guests and asked the speakers a few questions. In hurried movements, the educators began to prepare the next point, reflected in a moment of sharing in groups, jumping from room to room, discovering new topics on coexistence and interreligious dialogue through dynamic activities, some of them led by some of the speakers. This programme provided an opportunity for young people to get closer to some of the speakers, and it is increasingly important for these actions to be reciprocal, as it is important for everyone to be able to gather information and knowledge about realities they don't know. Goffman (1993) stated that "when an individual presents himself in front of others, he will have numerous reasons to try to control the impression he receives of the situation" (p.26). In this way, the gestures, words and actions were aimed not only at conveying a message, but also at conveying an idea about oneself, discreetly immersed in small power games. After the day's agenda had been completed, the closing ceremony was held, bringing all the protagonists and students together again for a final word, aspiring to reflect on change, awareness, dialogue and hope.

From an critical reflexive autoethnographic point of view, this event can be interpreted as a microcosm of social and cultural practices that seek to maintain social order and cohesion in a plural society such as Lebanon. Each speaker, guest, student or teacher ends up playing a role in different contexts, providing an individual adjustment in their behaviour in accordance with the expectations of the audience and the circumstances (Goffman, 1993). On the other hand, the interpretation of these social roles involves the individual in the construction and maintenance as part of society, sustained by daily interactions that make up the social structure.

The interaction between the different actors is symbolic, representing peaceful religious coexistence and mutual respect, centralising the discourse on the importance of tolerance and coexistence for individual and collective well-being. Garfinkel (1967) argues that everyday social interactions are constructed by practices, which individuals use to create a sense of order and comprehensibility in the social world. The respectful gestures between the Christian and Muslim speakers reflect everyday practices of negotiation and flexibility that nurture social peace by making their actions comprehensible to others. This initiative is not just an academic or religious event, but an example of how social practices can sustain peaceful coexistence in a society with such religious diversity.

[2.5. Notre Dame University - Louaize](#)

Notre Dame University - Louaize (NDU) is a private Christian university located in Lebanon which, despite its Maronite roots and Catholic orientation, welcomes students from various religious denominations, including Muslims. Its main campus is in Mount Lebanon, in the Keserwan area, with two additional campuses in North Lebanon and the Shouf region. This plurality reflects the complexity and religious diversity of the country, fostering an environment of interfaith coexistence, which also materialises in the curriculum, where subjects related to religion are compulsory and aim to demystify prejudices and stereotypes about different religious beliefs. These subjects provide students with an opportunity to expand their understanding of religious pluralism, helping to build a more inclusive and tolerant mindset in a society marked by divisions.

However, NDU faces significant challenges due to the growing emigration of families, a result of the economic and social crises plaguing Lebanon. This emigration has contributed to a decrease in the number of students enrolled, as many families leave the country in search of better living conditions abroad. In addition, the difficult economic situation leads many students to abandon their studies, as they are unable to raise the necessary funds to pay their tuition fees. This scenario reflects a wider crisis affecting higher education in Lebanon.

Despite these adversities, many students show admirable resilience. Some of them, determined to complete their studies, work at night to support their families and still attend classes during the day. This effort highlights the perseverance of Lebanese youth in securing a better future, even in the face of such adverse conditions.

The NDU, for its part, endeavours to support these students wherever possible, providing scholarships and financial assistance for students from needy families, enabling many to continue their studies despite economic difficulties. However, this scenario of socio-economic crisis makes it difficult for teachers to earn fair salaries, causing them to emigrate. Those who stay, more than a job, take on a missionary role in raising awareness among young people, in the hope of a structural change in the country. This support and mission reveals the commitment of the university and its teaching staff to promoting access to education, regardless of the economic conditions of its students.

This environment of diversity and support has created a unique space for interfaith and intercultural dialogue, making the NDU an example of peaceful coexistence and collaboration in a society marked by tensions. The presence of students of different faiths, the compulsory religious subjects and the institution's support for students in financial difficulties reinforce the role of education as a tool for social transformation and building a culture of peace in Lebanon.

Following several informal conversations with different students, in a kind of informal *focus group*, it was possible to explore their aspirations for the future and understand their perceptions of the country's reality. In this sense, the students involved, who were coming out of a written assessment of a subject in the Department of Religion, Culture and Philosophical Studies, demonstrated a deep reflection on the future of Lebanon, especially in relation to the religious and cultural diversity that shapes its reality. Their aspirations centre on three main areas: peaceful coexistence, political reform and the construction of a new narrative that overcomes the historical legacy of conflict. The young generation is hopeful about the future, but at the same time recognises the profound challenges facing the country.

Several students said that coexistence between different religious groups is possible and desirable, emphasising that universities, like the NDU, are spaces for interaction where religious differences are less relevant. One of the students said that "we don't separate, and we don't label people", reflecting a common desire to transcend the sectarian divisions that have marked Lebanon's past. For them, peaceful coexistence is already a reality in many contexts, such as the university environment, but it is still far from being achieved in the country as a whole. They aspire to a Lebanon where religion is not used as a divisive political tool.

Another area of aspiration for this generation is the need for political reform that decouples religion from government. One of the students said that the main problem in Lebanon is that "a lot of the fight politically in Lebanon has to do with religion". Many students believe that to reduce extremism, it is necessary to "take the religion out of politics", in other words, to disassociate political identity from religion, which is often used as a power mechanism. The proposal is to build a more inclusive and representative political system that promotes national unity rather than reinforcing divisions.

Some students also recognised the weight of the past on older generations' perceptions of other religions, with one student stating that, "blood was shed, and many innocent people were killed, but the people who were responsible for the blood that was shed do not represent the whole religion". There is hope that the new generation will be able to overcome inherited prejudices and build a more inclusive and tolerant future, while recognising the difficulties inherent in this process.

As we have already seen, the Lebanese reality is marked by political instability, the economic crisis and the impact of the refugee crisis. Many students expressed a pessimistic view of the country's ability to overcome these challenges, supporting this idea by stating that, "the main problem with the country and its current state is that a lot of this generation, our generation, sees it's not worth staying." There is a general feeling of disillusionment with the political system, which is seen as corrupt and stagnant. Students see few opportunities for real change, and many consider emigration to be the only viable way out.

A recurring theme in the students' responses was frustration with political polarisation and corruption. Several students mentioned that Lebanese politics is dominated by religious factions, which perpetuates division and prevents the building of a functional state. One student pointed out that, despite promises of change, "when the elections come, they will vote for the same people again and again," highlighting the sense of a vicious cycle that dominates the country's politics. This polarisation creates an environment that reduces hope and credibility in political institutions.

Although most students expressed pessimism about the country's immediate future, some believe that education and interfaith dialogue can be important tools for promoting peace and reducing extremism. One student emphasised the importance of universities as spaces where different cultures and religions can interact constructively, saying that "we have a lot of common places like universities, the schools, which has a lot of mix of

many cultures and religious groups". These spaces are seen as microcosms of possible peaceful coexistence in the country.

Analysing the aspirations of NDU students reveals a youth divided between hope for building a more inclusive future and disillusionment with the current state of Lebanon. The central themes that emerge include the need to dissociate politics from religion, promote interfaith coexistence and overcome the historical legacy of conflict. However, pessimism about the possibility of real change, combined with the desire to emigrate, suggests that despite aspirations, the challenges to building peace and stability in Lebanon remain significant.

Conclusion

The Critical Reflexive Autoethnographic insights presented in this chapter provide an essential lens through which to understand the complex realities of conducting research in Lebanon. By critically reflecting on fieldwork experiences, daily interactions, and the socio-political undercurrents shaping peacebuilding efforts, this chapter has highlighted how education, resilience, and interfaith dynamics intersect in conflict-prone environments. These reflections not only contextualise the research setting but also underscore the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate tensions and strive for coexistence in their everyday lives.

Building upon this foundation, the next chapter shifts towards a thematic analysis of the interviews and focus groups, where participants' voices take centre stage. This analytical process will explore key themes emerging from the data, examining how non-formal education, solidarity, and interfaith cooperation contribute to countering religious extremism and fostering reconciliation. By weaving together empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives, the following discussion aims to illuminate the transformative potential of education in fragile contexts, providing deeper insights into its role as both a preventive and constructive force in peacebuilding.

CHAPTER VI

Resilience Narratives: Data Analysis and Reflections

1. Insights from the Data: Key Themes

This study employs a qualitative empirical approach, utilising thematic analysis to explore the complex dimensions of extremism and peacebuilding. The analysis followed a mixed inductive-deductive process: the overarching dimensions, **Extremism** and **Peacebuilding**, along with the themes, were defined deductively based on the theoretical framework (*a priori*). Subsequently, the sub-themes emerged inductively from the data. This approach enabled the organisation of the data into a clear and structured framework of key themes, visually represented in *Figure 1*. The figure illustrates the relationships between dimensions, themes, and sub-themes, as well as their hierarchical organisation.

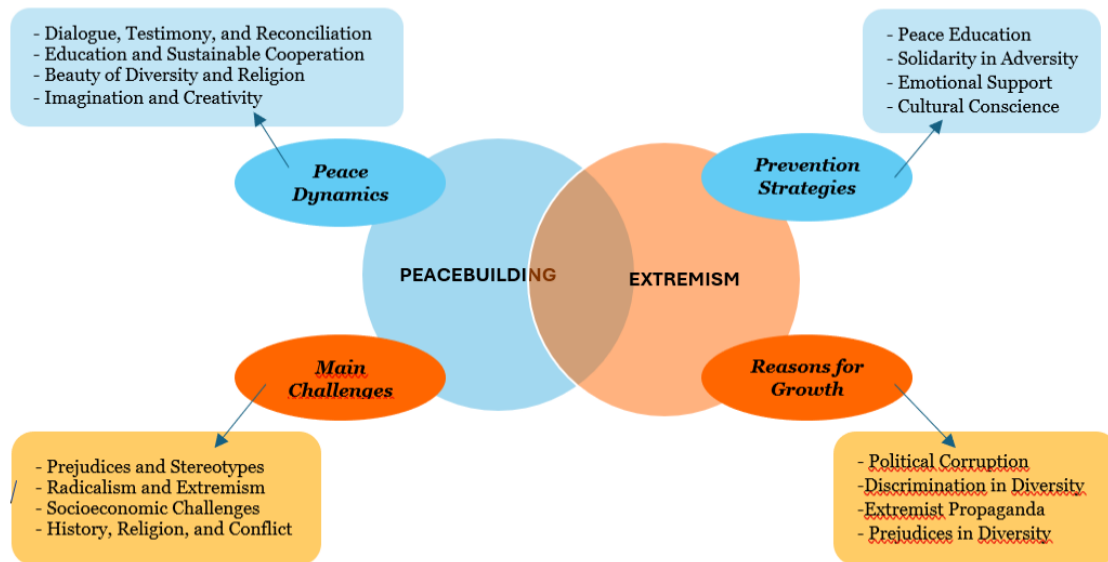


Figure 21 - Dimensions, Themes and Subthemes

2. Extremism Dimension

Within the dimension of Extremism, two key themes are identified: Prevention Strategies and Reasons for Growth. Prevention Strategies encompass sub-themes such as “Peace Education”, “Solidarity in Adversity”, “Emotional Support”, and “Cultural Conscience”, which emphasise practical and conceptual approaches aimed at countering extremism through education, emotional resilience, and fostering solidarity.

Conversely, Reasons for Growth examines the underlying factors that contribute to the proliferation of extremism. This theme includes sub-themes such as “Political Corruption”, “Discrimination in Diversity”, “Extremist Propaganda”, and “Prejudices in Diversity”, highlighting the societal and structural issues that enable extremism to thrive.

Among these sub-themes, Prevention Strategies focus on building resilience and promoting non-violence as core principles in counter-extremism efforts. The following section will present the sub-themes linked to this overarching theme.

a) Peace Education

In societies marked by historical tensions and cultural divides, Peace Education emerges as a foundational strategy to counter extremism, reduce hate speech, and foster coexistence.

Education emerges as a fundamental instrument for promoting tolerance and mutual respect, as reflected by some respondents, who highlighted its transformative potential in breaking down prejudices and fostering coexistence. The Orthodox Priest (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024) observed that “our faith is encouraging and support and push toward respecting the other,” underscoring how religious values can align with educational initiatives to promote mutual respect. The DLR Founder (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024) further emphasised the importance of connecting individuals to peacebuilders, stating, “the strategies that I would recommend... are the strategies that would connect them to peace builders, people who are able to cross the bridge to overcome difficulties, to overcome challenges, to overcome radicalism, to overcome hate speech, etc.” This idea is reinforced by the perspective that “because our parents and teachers and school taught us to love each other, and to having friends from different religions, if we want to maintain this relationship between friends, we don't need to so much be religious” (Student 1, students focus group, April 23, 2024).

Practical measures were also proposed as ways to normalise coexistence and acceptance. Student 2 (students focus group, April 23, 2024) suggested that “we could do awareness campaigns and let them know that there is no problem being with each other,” an idea further expanded by Student 1, who remarked:

We don't need to think that we are different, we need to think that we are all brothers. If you have enemies, we need to love our enemies, like we don't need to make enemies, we need to make friends to help, to build our society, to build a better education. (students focus group, April 23, 2024)

The role of children as a unique opportunity for cultivating openness and tolerance was also emphasised. Tutor A explained that “because the kids are blank slates now, they don't have this prejudice, or this thing built into them. So, when we're working with the

kids, they are the future, because they are still open, they have an open mind” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These ideas align with the shared experiences of summer camps, where Tutor B observed, “in the first days of the summer camp, everyone is like, ‘What is this prayer?’ But by the end of the camp, everyone is saying every prayer. It’s amazing when you see that” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Such initiatives demonstrate the value of creating inclusive spaces that enable participants to overcome initial differences and foster mutual respect.

In the context of education for peace, several participants emphasise the need for a critical and contextualised education capable of combating radicalism. Highlighting the transformative role of education, Tutor A observed that “education gives you a bigger mind, an open mind, and understanding of the world and an understanding of others to look at the person as a human first, and then to be open to understanding their backgrounds” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This idea is echoed by Tutor C, who suggested that reforming the curriculum to include diverse historical narratives could open minds further, saying, “you can help them to add some ideas in the chapters, specifically the history about the civilizations... to open to the other, and to know the other specific in this” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

While Lebanon is often celebrated for its education system, Tutor A critiqued its limitations, stating:

Lebanon is known for its education. Since we were young, we were told that Lebanon has very good education. People come from outside to study in Lebanon. But as I grew up, and as I studied the education [...] I realised that our curriculum sucks. It sucks because there are no equal opportunities for everyone. You know, the world is much more advanced than we are now. So, at the time that they built this curriculum, it was great. It was top of the world, but they haven’t upgraded it since centuries ago (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

This critique underscores the urgent need for a curriculum that not only modernises its content but also ensures inclusivity and equality. In contrast, Student 1 provided a more optimistic view, noting that “I think that education might help the student because there are courses that teach them to be more tolerant” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). This reflects how, despite its flaws, certain aspects of the system still hold potential for fostering tolerance and inclusivity if expanded and improved.

The risks of ideological influences within schools were also noted by several respondents. Student 1 pointed out that “you can’t find the extremist [...] in the public school; but in

some schools there is a specific ideology,” a concern further supported by Student 2, who added that “some schools specific in the suburbs, it's mainly in the same contacts, same ideology” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). These reflections illustrate how certain educational environments can perpetuate division and underline the necessity of creating spaces that foster inclusivity and critical thinking.

Building on this, Sheik Alawid emphasised the need for educational frameworks to adapt to contemporary realities, arguing that “we need an academic way to enlightened speech and to counteract radicalism and conflicts. The generation of today, we cannot live today as a people 700 years ago or 100 years ago”. He also addressed the broader historical context, explaining, “the society that we're living in, we cannot get out of this context that we have lived since hundreds of years or thousands of years... We need an academic way to enlighten speech and to counteract radicalism and conflicts” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). His perspective reinforces the importance of education that tackles deeply rooted societal challenges while promoting critical thought and open-mindedness.

The importance of institutional support is highlighted by the majority of religious leaders and tutors, who highlighted the critical need for long-term commitment and structured frameworks to ensure the effectiveness of such programmes. Sheik Sunni pointed out that the initiatives are strong and valuable but noted that, “if they cannot go, there is no sustainability, and that’s not good” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This concern aligns with Tutor B’s emphasis on early intervention, saying that, “to keep the depolarization, I must work on the minor, the children... if I work with someone who is not able to listen to me, I cannot get any results in the future” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024).

Tutor C also reinforced the importance of external organisations, explaining that, “there is awareness session and many NGOs in the camps make awareness session training” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). These grassroots efforts play a vital role in creating immediate impact, but Sheik Sunni argued that institutional support is equally crucial, stating that:

We need to have a direction, guidelines, authorities with solid foundations that can adopt and sponsor such initiatives like what we are doing. Then we can shine more and give us some kind of legitimacy, part of our academic life, social life, religious life (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

The DLR Founder further emphasised the importance of role models who embody the values they advocate. His perspective highlights the need for authentic leadership and lived experiences to inspire and sustain educational initiatives, particularly in contexts where trust and credibility are vital, stating that:

These people are true speakers, are true testimony. Through like they did it in their lives, not in their publications, not in their books, not in their sermons, not in their talks, not in their confidences. But mainly they did it through their own life (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024).

However, the challenges of sustainability are not only logistical but also geopolitical. The Orthodox Priest noted that “the door for education, for peace it’s a possibility, but in a platonic way, because big countries that have interests in Lebanon, they want to find their opportunity in the country” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This reflection underscores how external influences and competing agendas can undermine the long-term viability of initiatives, making institutional support and independence even more critical.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of inter-religious education as a foundation for peace, emphasising its role in bridging divides between different faiths and promoting mutual respect. Tutor B explained that religion and education together create a basis for self-improvement, saying that, “the base is religion and education, because religion has rules to tell people how to be a great person and how to evaluate themselves to be the greatest version of them” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This idea is echoed by Tutor C, who stated that understanding other religions can foster inclusivity, explaining that “I am in the middle... You can learn about all the religions, to know the others, but not just for the Muslim or Christian. Students can choose because no one chooses their religion” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024).

The role of a diverse curriculum was also highlighted by Tutor A, who shared that, “our curriculum included stories from different places and lessons from different countries. It was interesting to learn about those different cultures... It exposes you to different people, to different cultures” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Similarly, the Orthodox Priest emphasised the need to create opportunities for young people to meet within their own religious groups before opening up to others, saying that, “we need to allow our young men and women to meet other inside the same religious group first and then to focus on what we are. Our faith is encouraging and support and push toward respecting the other” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

These perspectives collectively highlight how inter-religious education can serve as a platform to promote understanding, reduce prejudice, and create a more cohesive society. By integrating diverse religious and cultural narratives, education becomes a powerful tool for fostering dialogue and reconciliation in contexts marked by division.

In summary, Peace Education emerges as a multifaceted strategy to counter extremism, foster tolerance, and build resilience in societies marked by division. Highlighting its various dimensions, the participants emphasise the transformative potential of education in promoting coexistence, critical thinking, and mutual respect. By leveraging inter-religious understanding, contextualised learning, and sustained institutional support, this approach not only dismantles prejudices but also equips individuals and communities with the tools to navigate historical and cultural complexities. While challenges such as sustainability and cultural resistance persist, the insights shared by respondents underscore that Peace Education, when carefully structured and supported, has the power to cultivate a more inclusive and harmonious society.

b) **Solidarity in Adversity**

In the face of adversity, solidarity emerges as a vital mechanism to foster inclusion, reduce prejudice, and build resilient communities. Respondents highlighted how solidarity can manifest both through tangible actions and deeper societal changes,

With regard to building solidarity through lived actions and positive engagement, few respondents highlighted its significance in fostering mutual understanding and social cohesion, highlighted how solidarity often finds its most authentic expression in lived actions and collaborative efforts. Gestures of inclusion and cooperation have the power to transform relationships and break down barriers. As noted earlier, the DLR Founder emphasised the importance of connecting young people with role models who embody the principles of peace and solidarity. True impact, he explained, comes from those who “did it through their own life, and not in their publications, not in their books, not in their sermons, not in their talks, not in their confidences” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). This highlights how authentic lived experiences can inspire meaningful change and build trust, particularly in contexts of adversity.

One powerful example of solidarity in action comes from Ain al-Hilweh, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, a place heavily guarded with stringent security measures. Inspections at its entrances often require individuals, including children, to remove their shoes for examination, a process that can feel intimidating, especially for young children. Tutor C, a Palestinian refugee, shared a poignant story of a police officer

who, during one such inspection, sought to ease the tension for a five-year-old child. Addressing the child, the officer said, "don't be scared; I will clean your shoes." On a subsequent day of inspection, the child, surprised by the change in behaviour, told his father, "dad, dad, he doesn't take to clean my shoes." In response, the father affirmed his child's dignity and worth by saying, "You are a VIP – Very Important Palestinian" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

Such moments of humanity are mirrored in other examples of positive engagement. Tutor C recounted another instance of collaboration, where plays were organised between police and refugees to address discrimination, explain that "we prepared a play with the police and the refugees... the discrimination from the police against the refugees decreases, and the point of view of the refugee about the police changes" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These activities highlight how cooperative efforts can reshape perceptions and build trust in environments marked by division.

Beyond authority figures, solidarity is also fostered through community-driven initiatives. Tutor B shared how a simple activity, like painting stairs together, became a symbol of cooperation: "Two weeks ago, we painted stairs with young people, all together in a way of cooperation. That's a sign of cooperation in a simple task without prejudices" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Similarly, Tutor A described how seasonal festivities in Lebanon created opportunities for interfaith solidarity stating:

During Christmas, we had a lot of markets in Lebanon, and there were many people wearing the hijab enjoying the Christmas markets, and no one had a problem with it... During Ramadan, Christians were also going to the Iftar activities, respecting them and learning about them. So, it starts with the municipalities (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

Together, these reflections illustrate how solidarity, when expressed through lived actions and positive engagement, can challenge prejudices, build bridges, and foster meaningful connections in diverse and divided communities. These gestures, whether small or large, demonstrate the power of tangible actions to create lasting change.

Several respondents highlighted the transformative power of shifting mindsets and addressing systemic barriers to foster solidarity and resilience. Tutor A underscored the importance of crises as opportunities to bring people together, explaining that "the bigger issue, in my opinion, is the mentality. Crises can bring people together. Solidarity!" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This idea was supported by Tutor B, who emphasised that "the mentality needs to change. Solidarity can bring people

together in ways that division never will” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These reflections underline how shifts in collective thinking can create pathways for unity and cooperation.

Building on this, Sheik Alawid argued that fostering solidarity also requires addressing broader socio-economic and systemic challenges. He stated that “if the site is able to counteract, overcome the social, economic, financial situation challenges, then we can erase radicalism” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This perspective links the importance of solidarity to structural change, suggesting that only by tackling root causes can communities effectively combat division and extremism.

In practical terms, Tutor A reflected on countering prejudice through positive narratives. Sharing a personal experience, they noted, “my quick thinking saved me... I told my brother that Syrian kids were catching up on education because of the war. I didn’t want to build prejudice. Instead, I gave a hopeful story of equal opportunities” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This effort to foster inclusion was further reinforced when she explained, “I tried my best to build this positive prejudice... We want to help everyone in a way that suits them, giving equal opportunities. So that they can catch up to the things that they lost” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Together, these accounts illustrate how individual actions, and positive messaging can reshape perceptions and foster unity.

Sheik Sunni provided a more radical perspective, expressing frustration with entrenched political systems. He remarked, “well, we can do one thing, put all the politicians in jail. This is what we can do to have peace, because these are the reasons for terrorism and extremism. Politicians no more” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). While this statement reflects a more extreme approach, it highlights the deep dissatisfaction with systemic inequities and the urgency for significant reform.

Together, these reflections highlight that changing mentalities and overcoming challenges require both cultural shifts and structural changes. In contexts of adversity, solidarity emerges as a practical and transformative force, rooted in lived actions and the willingness to challenge systemic barriers. Respondents emphasised how inclusive gestures, positive engagement, and collaborative initiatives can reshape perceptions, foster trust, and promote inclusion. At the same time, they underscored the need to address socio-economic inequities as essential steps toward sustainable unity. These insights demonstrate that solidarity is not merely an abstract ideal but a tangible and dynamic process capable of bridging divides and building resilience in diverse and challenging circumstances.

c) **Emotional Support**

Emotional support plays a pivotal role in educational contexts, particularly when working with children and youth affected by adversity. Respondents highlighted its importance as a foundation for fostering resilience and creating safe spaces for expression, often prioritised even before academic learning.

Emotional support was described as central to creating an environment where students feel safe and valued, with storytelling and active listening emerging as key strategies. It was noted that “at the end of the day, it is emotional support before it is educational support... So, you know, storytelling, daily discussions, daily updates, like how was your day today... just to be more open, but obviously with boundaries” (Tutor A, tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This approach fosters trust and allows students to share their experiences in a safe and supportive space.

Storytelling, in particular, was highlighted as a powerful tool for helping children process their emotions and traumas. It was described as “the key to go through their traumas,” although respondents acknowledged its limitations, recognising that “we are not specialised in helping them. We cannot give them advice because we have such a small part of their lives” (Tutor A, tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Similarly, listening was considered an equally vital component of emotional support, with one respondent observing that “we can help the student, but we cannot fix the traumas... We are listeners more than speakers” (Tutor B, tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These perspectives underline the importance of providing emotional relief while recognising the boundaries of the tutors' expertise.

When emotional challenges exceed their capacity to address, respondents stressed the need for professional intervention. For example, it was noted that “if there is something huge, we can call the school saying that these kids need special support” (Tutor B, tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This collaborative approach ensures that while emotional support remains integral to education, students with deeper needs receive appropriate care.

These reflections collectively illustrate that emotional support is not merely an adjunct to education but a fundamental component of it. By prioritising storytelling, active listening, and collaboration with professional resources, tutors create an environment where emotional resilience can flourish, enabling students to navigate their challenges with greater confidence and stability.

Challenges and boundaries in emotional support are signalled among respondents, who reflected on the complexities of providing emotional care to students in challenging contexts. Tutor B highlighted the proximity of their interactions with students, even in virtual settings, explaining:

When I am working with the kids that are Muslim or Christian, even on Zoom, I am inside his home. I can listen to his parents talking. I can see her sister playing. So here I know I can breathe, and I can break it (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

To address these challenges, both tutors emphasised the importance of structured training and support. Tutor A described a session organised by the DLR where psychologists provided guidance, sharing that “we did a training session through the DLR... licensed psychologists spoke to all the tutors about how to not get emotionally attached to those students, how to help them actually emotionally” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This reflection underscores the value of equipping tutors with tools to balance empathy and detachment, ensuring they can provide effective emotional support without compromising their well-being.

The emotional toll of supporting students who have experienced trauma was another significant concern. Tutor A shared a personal challenge, reflecting:

Imagine someone lost someone during the Beirut blast and then a kid is trying to tell them about their experience. I would tell them, 'I went through it as well.' I can't hear you speaking about it because I was affected by it (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

However, she also noted that not sharing the same trauma allowed for a different approach, stating that, “So when someone would start to speak about the Beirut blast with me, I had a blank slate because I was able to listen to them since I did not share this trauma with them” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These contrasting experiences highlight the complexities of navigating personal and professional boundaries in emotionally charged situations.

Beyond their individual roles, respondents stressed the importance of broader community involvement to strengthen emotional support networks. As Tutor B remarked, “we need more volunteers and more qualified youth” to alleviate pressures on tutors and enhance the impact of emotional assistance (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This collaborative approach underscores the shared belief that effective support requires both personal commitment and collective resources.

Together, these reflections highlight the intricate balance tutors must maintain in providing emotional support, fostering trust and connection while safeguarding their own well-being. By combining empathy with clear boundaries and seeking training, collaboration, and support from the community, tutors navigate the emotional complexities of their roles, ensuring that emotional support remains both effective and sustainable in fostering resilience and connection.

d) **Cultural Conscience**

Cultural Conscience emerged as a pivotal aspect of prevention strategies within the dimension of peacebuilding.

The majority of the tutors supported by a student highlighted the transformative potential of embracing diversity to foster meaningful connections and break down barriers. Student 4 observed that “the diversity can have an important impact on relationships. It can open perspectives and enrich social interactions, but sometimes it can also create challenges in communication and understanding between different cultures” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). This reflection underscores the dual nature of diversity, where differences can simultaneously enrich and complicate interactions.

Expanding on this idea, Tutor A shared how shared activities, such as sports, can bridge these challenges by focusing on common goals, stating that “you find a common ground... like with soccer tournaments where the teams are mixed. You forget your religion and focus on the goal” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This example illustrates how, when individuals concentrate on shared experiences rather than differences, diversity becomes a unifying force rather than a dividing one. Tutor A further reflected on how these interactions can challenge preconceived notions, recalling, “It was very interesting to suddenly discover that the friends I'd been playing with... Oh, they're actually Muslims! I had no idea. I just knew that we had names” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Her account highlights how casual, everyday interactions can break down stereotypes, fostering mutual understanding.

Tutor B added a metaphorical perspective, describing diversity as “a garden, full of flowers, because, if a garden has no flower, it has no meaning” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This poetic image captures the idea that the richness of a community lies in its variety, and without diversity, the collective experience becomes less meaningful. Echoing this sentiment, Tutor A shared that,

We were showing me their differences, and I was showing them my differences, but we were meeting together on our differences. They would share their lives with me, and I would share my life with them, and I would accept them just as they are (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

The pivotal role of education in fostering understanding, challenging stereotypes, and enabling individuals to make informed decisions about their beliefs and values was emphasised. Tutor C emphasised the importance of education in broadening perspectives, stating, “students can learn about different religions and cultures. This way, they know others and make their own choices” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This reflects a broader belief that education can serve as a bridge between diverse groups, fostering respect and mutual understanding.

Building on this idea, Tutor C also advocated for education rooted in local contexts to deepen students' connections to their own identities stating that “you can open the discussion about their own civilization, their own culture, and not to talk about the French civilization” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This approach reinforces the notion that education can empower students by grounding their understanding in their own heritage while encouraging dialogue with other cultures. As noted earlier, Tutor B remarked that “religion and education are the base” resulting in two elements, when integrated thoughtfully, can complement each other by nurturing emotional intelligence and fostering shared values that contribute to the strengthening of social cohesion and ethical awareness (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

The majority respondents emphasised the importance of challenging entrenched mindsets and addressing divisions exacerbated by political and cultural barriers. Tutor A critiqued the societal attitudes that perpetuate divisions, stating, “the crisis is not the issue. The money is not the issue. War is not the issue. Outside parties are not the issue. The issue is actually in the people, in the humans that are living closed mind” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This reflection underscores how deeply ingrained perspectives can hinder efforts toward unity and understanding.

Student 3 echoed this sentiment, noting how entrenched political and social narratives often emphasise differences rather than commonalities, stating that “the policy, the politics and the bad mindset that people put in their mind that we are different... but having friends from other religions is sometimes better than having a friend from the same religion” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). This highlights how personal

relationships and shared experiences can challenge preconceived notions and foster a sense of commonality across cultural and religious divides.

As noted earlier, Sheik Alawid reflected on the historical and societal challenges that contribute to these divisions. While previously discussed in the context of systemic approaches, his observation that “we need an academic way to enlighten speech and to counteract radicalism and conflicts” also reflects an awareness of the necessity for change (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This underscores the potential of education and dialogue in transforming entrenched narratives and fostering openness.

Sheik Sunni critically reflected on the limitations of high-profile interfaith initiatives, noting that

I have been with other religious leaders, and I have been invited to many, many, many events in five-star hotels, with big budget, big ceremonies, red carpet. But it finished immediately at the same place. It was a lot of protocols, but nothing sustainable (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

His statement highlights how many well-funded interfaith dialogues remain superficial, focusing on ceremonial displays rather than fostering meaningful, long-term impact at the grassroots level. This critique underscores the need for authentic, community-driven engagement that moves beyond symbolic gestures to create tangible social change.

Tutor B, reflecting on the role of religious figures, observed, “If we can talk about polarisations, I personally think that religious people are the most polarised. But they are capable of depolarising if they become aware of their impact” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This highlights both the challenges and the potential of religious leaders in bridging divides and fostering reconciliation.

The Orthodox Priest offered a nuanced view on external influences, cautioning that “the door for education, for peace it’s a possibility, but in a platonic way, because big countries that have interests in Lebanon, they want to find their opportunity in the country” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This critique underscores how external political interests can hinder local efforts to build cohesion, further emphasising the need for grassroots and community-driven initiatives.

Together, these reflections illustrate the multifaceted nature of overcoming closed-mindedness and divisions. By challenging entrenched mindsets, fostering dialogue, and addressing systemic barriers, individuals and communities can create pathways toward greater understanding and unity.

Reasons for Growth explores the factors contributing to the rise of extremist ideologies in vulnerable contexts. Respondents highlighted systemic issues, such as political corruption, discriminatory practices, and socio-economic disparities, as key drivers that fuel division and foster radicalisation. These challenges, often intertwined with propaganda and prejudice, underscore the complexities of addressing extremism effectively. The following section will present the sub-themes linked to this overarching theme.

a) **Political Corruption**

Political Corruption emerged as a central issue in understanding the factors that drive division and foster extremism. Respondents from diverse backgrounds highlighted how political systems manipulate social and religious dynamics, perpetuating division and mistrust. The Orthodox Priest pointed to external influences as a key factor, stating, “there is a lot of interest for big, big countries, international forces that are abusing from these divisions between the people to execute their own agenda” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This observation was emphasised the international dimension of political agendas, noting that, “the fund of UNRWA... freezing the fund of their donations to make a new plan, the map of Palestine. It's a challenge. It's more challenge to preserve your identity as a Palestinian” (Tutor C, (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These reflections underscore how both external and local politics exploit societal vulnerabilities for strategic gains.

Sheik Alawid shifted the focus to domestic politics, criticising the pervasive negative influence of political systems, stating that “because I started from a very long mindset, very long that politics have 80% influenced negatively on that,” he remarked, highlighting the entrenched nature of political corruption (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This sentiment was reinforced by Student 3, who identified harmful political narratives as a root cause of division saying that “the policy, the politics and the bad mindset that people put in their mind that we are different. And yes, that's it.” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Their observations point to how political agendas embed divisive mindsets within the population, creating barriers to unity.

The intersection of politics and religion emerged as another significant concern. Sheik Sunni criticised politicians for enabling religious corruption, stating:

Politicians are sponsoring all corruption and even religious corruption. Then sometimes, religious leaders who are reading the sermons, they call for extremism, they let the religious leaders talk about whatever they want. They don't stop them, but if they don't stop, the believers will believe in what they are saying (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

Entanglement between politics and religion is particularly evident in Lebanon, where political parties exert substantial influence over religious dynamics, Student 1 told that “politics can make a difference! There are so many, so many political parties, and it makes a big influence. It makes a big influence on the religions also” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Together, these voices illustrate how political corruption not only exploits societal vulnerabilities but also fuels extremism by leveraging religious platforms to deepen divisions.

b) **Discrimination in Diversity**

Discrimination in Diversity emerged as a pervasive issue, reflecting deeply rooted societal divisions that hinder inclusivity and coexistence. The Orthodox Priest framed the reality starkly, stating that, “divisions are the reality of the ground... there are sometimes many divisions inside the same group... The divisions are the sources for wars and conflicts” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This observation underscores how both intergroup and intragroup divisions fuel discord and perpetuate cycles of conflict. Echoing this, Sheik Alawid reflected on the inherent differences among people, noting that, “we know that we are different, this is normal. Nobody is totally identic even inside the same group... But some concepts, some practices, and some persons do not help us to understand or be closer” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). These reflections illustrate how societal structures and attitudes often amplify rather than mitigate differences.

Tutor C provided a poignant example of institutionalised discrimination faced by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, stating:

The personal refugee in Lebanon, they don't have the right to work or study in the public school... The experience is just to make a siege about the Palestinian and isolate him to. And it's not to integrate with the Lebanese society (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024).

This systemic exclusion fosters a sense of isolation and marginalisation, further entrenching divisions. Building on this, he shared a personal account of lost

opportunities, recounting, “when I was a student, I had (the possibility of) many scholarships, but I couldn’t take them because I am Palestinian. You feel the discrimination” (Tutor C, tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These experiences highlight how discriminatory policies perpetuate inequality and limit opportunities for integration.

Tutor A offered insight into the subtle ways discrimination is embedded in everyday practices, describing how Syrian and Lebanese students are segregated in public schools stating that, “during the day, the Lebanese student’s study in the public school, and in the afternoon, the Syrian students study. I didn’t want to tell my young brother that we separate them, because I didn’t want to build a prejudice” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This account demonstrates how segregation, even if unintended, reinforces divisions and shapes perceptions from a young age.

Student voices further reinforced the ubiquity of discrimination in Lebanon. Student 1 observed, “it always happens here in my country, but not in all the places... There’s always discrimination between religions and on skin colours” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). This personal reflection aligns with Student 3’s comment that “discrimination is common in Lebanon... a problem of social connection” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Together, these perspectives highlight the lived realities of discrimination across multiple dimensions, from religion to race.

c) **Extremism Propaganda**

Extremist Propaganda emerged as a key driver of radicalisation, exploiting modern platforms and societal vulnerabilities to disseminate its narratives. As the DLR Founder noted, young individuals are increasingly “getting to different social media platforms that are promoting propaganda radicalism” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). These platforms, through sophisticated algorithms, target vulnerable users, creating echo chambers that amplify extremist ideologies. This digital strategy is often intertwined with socio-economic realities, as Sheik Alawid explained, “they are using people with limited resources, with naive mindset... they use them or abuse of them to destroy the societies, to destroy their situation” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This observation highlights how marginalised individuals, already struggling with limited opportunities, are particularly susceptible to manipulation by propaganda networks.

The scale and adaptability of extremist strategies were further emphasised by the DLR Founder, who remarked on the overwhelming infrastructure behind digital propaganda,

state that “sometimes you feel that you are combating, or you have a battle with a huge infrastructure of groups... TikTok will invade them with hundreds of videos that could, probably, or Instagram that could probably spread the hate speech theories” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). These platforms, by exploiting the accessibility of social media, ensure a continuous flow of extremist content, making it increasingly challenging to counteract their influence effectively.

Tutor C highlighted the intersection between ideology and education, pointing out how certain educational environments can perpetuate extremist narratives. He said that “you can't find the extremist with the it's not in the public school but in some schools that have a specific ideology” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This underscores how ideological biases within educational spaces can create fertile ground for radicalisation. Additionally, he observed how resistance movements shape ideological landscapes, stating, “the Islamic Movement is increasing, but refugees don't become members of this movement because it is just for the resistance” (Tutor C, tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This nuanced perspective shows how some movements gain legitimacy by aligning with broader socio-political causes, even if they do not actively recruit members.

d) Prejudices in Diversity

Prejudices in Diversity emerged as a recurring challenge, reflecting deeply ingrained tendencies that manifest across societal, educational, and political domains. Student 3 remarked on the prevalence of discrimination in Lebanon, describing it as “discrimination is common in Lebanon... a problem of social connection” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). This sense of disconnection was echoed by Student 1, who observed earlier that, “there's always like discrimination between religions and between skin colors... Maybe like if there was a difference, but not all the people” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). These reflections highlight how prejudice shapes interactions between diverse communities, often reinforcing divisions and fostering mistrust.

Tutor C provided poignant examples of how institutional and societal tendencies marginalise Palestinians. Reflecting on their experiences as a student, like I pointed earlier, it was shared, “the schools are specific for the Palestinian... it's to make a siege about the Palestinian and isolate him” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This exclusion extends beyond education, as he recounted being asked to remove a Palestinian flag pin by a supervisor, who insisted, “if you can take out the pin in the shirt, because I don't want any political association”. He answers that “it's not political, it's my country” (Tutor C, tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These experiences underscore how

prejudice operates at both systemic and interpersonal levels, denying individuals the opportunity to express their identities freely.

Tutor A reflected on the cyclical nature of prejudice in Lebanon, observing, “it’s just a cycle, it goes up and down, up and down and it never goes away. But when it reaches an all-time high, this is where the war happens” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This sentiment underscores how unchecked prejudice escalates over time, leading to broader social and political conflicts. Tutor C further critiqued societal attitudes, stating:

We claim that we are very integrated and very loving but then something happens, and we are very quick to blame each other. So, when something happens in the news or something, we are very quick to separate, like it’s them, not us, it’s us, not them (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

Within educational contexts, prejudice is often embedded in hidden curricula and unequal treatment. Tutor A explained in a dialogue with me about the hidden curriculum in Lebanon, stating that “there are no equal opportunities for everyone. Teachers carry suffering, and this reflects in how they teach Syrian students differently from Lebanese ones” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This observation highlights how bias in education perpetuates systemic inequality, shaping perceptions and opportunities for future generations.

The DLR Founder added another dimension, focusing on the polarisation fostered by extreme ideologies, stating that “certain type of discussions where they will start to be criticizing severely the moderate persons or moderate groups and trying to justify extreme left wing or extreme right wing” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). This polarisation not only deepens divides but also creates an environment where prejudice thrives, eroding efforts toward coexistence.

Together, these reflections demonstrate the pervasive and multifaceted nature of prejudice in diverse societies. By embedding itself in institutions, social dynamics, and individual mindsets, prejudice perpetuates divisions and inhibits meaningful connections. Addressing these challenges requires systemic reform, cultural shifts, and concerted efforts to foster inclusivity and understanding.

[2.3. Extremism Conclusion](#)

The dimension of Extremism examined the intricate balance between “Prevention Strategies” and “Reasons for Growth”, providing a comprehensive view of the factors shaping radicalisation. According to the respondents’ opinions, Prevention Strategies

hold transformative potential, with education, solidarity, and cultural awareness emerging as key tools to bridge societal divides and counteract extremist narratives. These approaches were described as essential for fostering inclusivity and resilience in diverse communities. Conversely, Reasons for Growth revealed systemic vulnerabilities, such as political corruption, discriminatory practices, and the pervasive influence of extremist propaganda, that perpetuate division and exacerbate radicalisation. Respondents highlighted how these factors manipulate societal tensions, often targeting marginalised groups, and contribute to a cycle of mistrust and alienation.

These perspectives underline the complexity of addressing extremism, requiring efforts to tackle root causes while reinforcing preventive strategies. The next dimension, Peacebuilding, will focus on reconciliation, dialogue, and sustainable pathways to unity, reflecting the respondents' reflections and insights.

3. Peacebuilding Dimension

Building on the insights gained from the analysis of extremism, the focus now shifts to **Peacebuilding**, which explores the challenges and strategies essential for achieving sustainable peace. Under the theme of “Main Challenges”, the analysis delves into sub-themes such as “*Prejudices and Stereotypes*,” “*Radicalism and Extremism*,” “*Socioeconomic Barriers*,” and “*History, Religion, and Conflict*.” These sub-themes highlight the multifaceted obstacles that hinder peacebuilding in diverse and conflict-prone contexts. In contrast, “Peace Dynamics” examines constructive approaches to fostering unity, with sub-themes like “*Dialogue, Testimony, and Reconciliation*,” “*Education and Sustainable Cooperation*,” “*Diversity and Religion*,” and “*Imagination and Creativity*.” These perspectives emphasise the critical role of dialogue, education, and inter-religious understanding in advancing reconciliation and sustainable cooperation.

3.1. Main Challenges

Main Challenges explores the core obstacles to fostering sustainable peace within the dimension of **Peacebuilding**. Respondents highlighted a range of interrelated issues, including deeply ingrained prejudices, the persistence of radical ideologies, socio-economic disparities, and the complex interplay of history, religion, and conflict. These challenges illustrate the multifaceted nature of peacebuilding in diverse and conflict-prone societies. The following section will present the sub-themes associated with these obstacles, providing a detailed analysis of each.

a) **Prejudices and Stereotypes**

Prejudices and Stereotypes represent significant barriers to peacebuilding in Lebanon, revealing the persistence of divisions within and between communities. Sheik Alawid highlighted how even internal fractures within religious groups hinder unity, explaining that:

We have difficulties in Tripoli, inside Muslims itself, between Muslims Sunnis and Muslims Alawids. We have faced some difficulties at this level also. It's still some parts of it, some traces, some remaining, very small, but it is visible till now (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

Notably, during the interview, Sheik Alawid and Sheik Sunni were present in the same room, demonstrating respect, admiration, and friendship toward one another, an outcome of their involvement in the DLR Sustainable Network for Religious Leaders, which fosters collaboration and mutual understanding among faith leaders. This moment underscores the potential for social change through intentional and sustained efforts. Sheik Sunni also reflected on the broader challenges of fostering interfaith relationships, noting that:

Internally, unfortunately, there are still people that hesitate to build a dialogue and a real relationship with non-Muslims. Externally... the absence of the state and the law, and power takes their glory, and they may cause harm for such relationships (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

These reflections reveal how societal hesitations, and systemic failures perpetuate divisions while emphasising the importance of initiatives like the DLR network in creating opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation.

Students provided further insights into how religious and cultural differences shape prejudices. Student 1 noted that “maybe two religions, maybe Christians and Muslims can be different... maybe they will make some problems between each other’s because they don't agree on the same thing” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Student 3 emphasised the prevalence of discrimination, describing it as before, its “frequent in Lebanon and a connectivity issue” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Adding to this, Student 4 reflected on the dual nature of diversity, saying that "diversity can have a significant impact on relationships between people. It can open up perspectives and enrich social interactions, but sometimes it can also pose challenges in communication and understanding between different cultures" (students focus group, April 23, 2024).

Together, these perspectives highlight the tension between the enriching potential of diversity and the challenges it presents to communication and understanding.

The lived experiences of refugees bring additional depth to these reflections. Tutor C explained, “I don't have a problem about the religious problem in Lebanon, but I have about the cultural differences and diversity because I am a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This exclusion is also evident in housing discrimination renting, as Tutor A shared:

They were saying, you know, we want to rent the home, but we're not gonna move in now... The second that the homeowners heard that they were people fleeing from the South... they don't want to rent their homes anymore (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

For Tutor A, this reflects a deeper issue, saying that “the bigger issue in my opinion, is the mentality. Crisis can bring people together... But people were standing in his way... who are supposed to feel for those people who have nothing to lose” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

These accounts illustrate the pervasive nature of prejudice in Lebanon, encompassing religious, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions. However, moments like the collaboration between Sheik Alawid and Sheik Sunni offer hope for social change, demonstrating the potential of structured initiatives to foster dialogue and mutual understanding. Addressing these stereotypes requires challenging entrenched mentalities, fostering dialogue, and implementing systemic changes to promote inclusivity and understanding.

b) Radicalism and Extremism

This subtheme present persistent challenges to peacebuilding, shaped by societal, political, and ideological factors. The DLR Founder highlighted the role of social media in attracting young people to extremist narratives, explaining that “about young people, the difficulty is the main changing because the social media today are using [it] to promote the propaganda” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). They emphasised the need for proactive measures, arguing that promoting peacebuilding and open-mindedness is essential to prevent youth from being drawn to radical ideologies.

Sheik Sunni echoed this concern, pointing to the influence of unchecked rhetoric from religious and political leaders. He stated:

Sometimes, religious leaders who are reading the sermons call for extremism. They let the religious leaders talk whatever they want, and the politicians don't stop them. If they don't stop, the believers will believe in what they are saying (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

This dynamic highlight how influential figures can amplify radical narratives if left unchallenged. Sheik Alawid added that some concepts and practices reinforce a mindset that divides rather than unites, creating an environment where radical ideas can spread. Previously, Student 3 also remarked on the divisive impact of political and social narratives, noting how policies and “politics contributes to extremism” and a harmful mindset (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Tutor A offered a broader perspective on the consequences of unchecked extremism, stating that “when it reaches an all-time high, this is where a civil war happens. Extremism goes in cycles, it builds up and then everything explodes” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This cyclical nature of radicalism illustrates the urgency of addressing its roots before escalation.

Within refugee camps, Tutor C highlights a different dimension of radicalism. He explained that, while the Islamic movement has grown, refugees often align with it not for religious reasons, but as an act of resistance. He observed that “it can sometimes appear as radicalism” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This distinction sheds light on the complex motivations behind certain affiliations, which may not always be ideologically driven but instead reflect broader socio-political struggles.

Together, these reflections demonstrate that radicalism and extremism are multifaceted phenomena, rooted in societal mindsets, unchecked rhetoric, and socio-political dynamics. Addressing these challenges requires fostering dialogue, challenging divisive narratives, and implementing systemic reforms to prevent the cycles of escalation and conflict that extremism inevitably triggers.

c) **Socioeconomic Challenges**

Socioeconomic challenges are a critical barrier to peacebuilding, shaping the capacity of communities to sustain networks, promote integration, and counter extremism. The Orthodox Priest emphasised the importance of sustained funding to maintain essential initiatives, noting that “the challenge now is to bring more projects, more funds, financial support, in order to sustain the group... to keep this network as a services network with the same charisma, with the same power” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This need for resources was echoed by Sheik Sunni, who highlighted how financial instability affects social cohesion, explaining that “if social life financially allows, we

could go and be much more together. But the financial situation is decapping us” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). Together, these perspectives illustrate how resource scarcity undermines both the continuity of peacebuilding efforts and the ability of communities to strengthen social ties.

Sheik Alawid added another layer to this discussion, pointing out that resource limitations create fertile ground for extremist ideologies. He observed that “religious extremism today it's a waste of time, especially among the tools that some are using, especially with the society that is very limited in resources, the poor society that is restricted in the resources” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This reflection aligns with Tutor B’s concern about Lebanon’s youth leaving the country, depleting its pool of progressive, open-minded individuals who could contribute to change. She explains that “the problem is even the youth are going out of Lebanon, so we’re running out. We are running out of youth, open mind people, people who are willing to work forward to change” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). The connection between these views highlights how limited resources and human capital exacerbate social fragmentation and hinder long-term progress.

The impact of socioeconomic exclusion is also evident in systemic marginalisation. Tutor C illustrated this with the example of Palestinian schools, stating that there are “schools [are] specific for the Palestinian... it’s to make a siege about the Palestinian and isolate them” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This systemic isolation, combined with broader resource constraints, perpetuates cycles of inequality and limits opportunities for integration. The Orthodox Priest reflected on the variability of challenges across different levels, noting that “sometimes [because] we have a series of long projects, we worked with university students, school students and NGOs. It depends. Every type of project, every level gets its own challenges” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

Together, these reflections reveal the multifaceted impact of socioeconomic challenges on peacebuilding. Resource scarcity, systemic exclusion, and the loss of human capital intertwine to create an environment that not only impedes progress but also exacerbates divisions. Addressing these issues requires sustainable investment, policy reform, and inclusive strategies tailored to the needs of diverse communities.

d) History, Religion and Conflict

This subtheme encompasses the enduring impact of historical divisions and the potential for religion to serve as both a source of division and a pathway to reconciliation.

Perpetuating historical divisions and social fragmentation, some respondents shed light on how Lebanon's historical conflicts have left deep scars, influencing societal structures and interactions to this day. Tutor C noted that "if you enter of the camps in Lebanon, the Civil War, it's not remembered. It's forgotten" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This reflection highlights how certain communities have chosen to suppress the memory of conflict, which Tutor A argued perpetuates divisions, explained that "the Lebanon is divided into areas... this city or this place is mostly Christian. So, the school that's located in this place has mostly Christian students, but the neighborhood right next to it, it's mostly Shia" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This segregation, both geographic and social, reinforces isolation and limits opportunities for interaction between groups.

Building on this, Sheik Alawid acknowledged the inevitability of these divisions, stating that "we know that we are different, this is normal... But the society that we're living in, we cannot get out of this context that we have lived since hundreds of years" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). The deeply entrenched nature of these differences was further illustrated by Tutor A, who described conflict in Lebanon as cyclical, stating that "it's just a cycle, it goes up and down, up and down [and] it never goes away. But when it reaches an all-time high, this is where the war happens" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

Amidst these structural and historical challenges, respondents also reflected on the emotional toll of conflict. Tutor B recounted their experience during the Beirut Blast, saying:

During the Beirut blast, I took her [young cousin] and I put her down and I was covering her to protect her. Then the aluminum door broke and continued into my back. I was afraid [and] I didn't know anything about my mom, my sister, my brother (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

Her personal story underscores the lingering trauma experienced by individuals, which Tutor A echoed, sharing that:

Imagine someone lost someone during the Beirut blast and then a kid is trying to tell them about their experience. I would tell them, 'I went through it as well.' I can't hear you speaking about it because I was affected by it (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

These voices collectively paint a picture of a society struggling to reconcile with its past. While Tutor C emphasised the erasure of memory within certain communities, Tutor A

and Sheik Alawid highlighted the persistence of physical and cultural divides. At the same time, the emotional accounts of the Beirut Blast illustrate how trauma continues to ripple through individuals and communities. Addressing these divisions will require not only systemic reforms but also sustained efforts to acknowledge past conflicts, promote dialogue, and create spaces for collective healing.

The role of religion is simultaneously highlighted as a point of division and an opportunity for fostering understanding and collaboration. The DLR Founder emphasised the importance of inter-religious dialogue, noting that “among the religious leaders, I would say that they need more and more opportunities to meet with each other and to connect with each other and to be able to work together” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). This idea was echoed by the Orthodox Priest, who reflected on the early challenges of fostering cooperation, stating that “at the beginning, when we started eight years ago, to promote this idea among others, it was a hard challenge to build a project together. But fortunately, it was easy to be done” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). These insights illustrate the potential for meaningful collaboration when opportunities for dialogue are nurtured, even amidst initial resistance.

Student 1 offered a different perspective on the complexities of religious diversity, stating that:

Maybe two religions, maybe Christians and Muslims can be different. Maybe in their studies, like in physics and science, there are some things forbidden in their holy books... Maybe they will make some problems between each other's because they don't agree on the same thing (students focus group, April 23, 2024).

This observation highlights how doctrinal differences can create barriers to understanding, particularly in practical or educational contexts. Tutor B reinforced this, acknowledging that “we have a very huge diversity, so, is it a conflict sometimes? Yes. Especially in their old ways and many others” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024).

Despite these challenges, respondents identified opportunities for building bridges through shared values and dialogue. The Orthodox Priest described how long-term engagement among communities has helped overcome initial hesitations, noting that projects and initiatives have gradually fostered collaboration. Similarly, Tutor C reflected on the absence of religious emphasis among certain groups, observing that “the religion it's not the main step for the Palestinian refugees [...] the Civil War is not remembered. It's forgotten!” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This perspective suggests that, for

some, the focus on common social and political concerns may outweigh religious differences, offering an entry point for dialogue and reconciliation.

Together, these reflections highlight the dual nature of religion in Lebanon's diverse society. While historical and doctrinal differences can present challenges, intentional efforts to foster dialogue and collaboration reveal the potential for religion to serve as a foundation for reconciliation. Sustained engagement and mutual respect are key to transforming religious diversity from a source of division into a pathway for peace.

3.2. Peace Dynamics

Peace Dynamics explores the constructive approaches essential for fostering sustainable peace in diverse and conflict-prone contexts. Respondents highlighted the importance of dialogue, testimony, and reconciliation as tools to address divisions and build trust. Additionally, education and sustainable cooperation emerged as central strategies for promoting mutual understanding and inclusivity. This section also examines the role of diversity, religion, and imagination and creativity in strengthening connections and encouraging innovative solutions to conflicts. The following analysis will present the subthemes that illustrate these dynamics and their potential to transform divisions into opportunities for peacebuilding.

a) **Dialogue, Testimony and Reconciliation**

This subtheme explores the transformative potential of collaboration, shared experiences, and the role of religious leaders in fostering peace and social cohesion. Respondents highlighted the importance of dialogue and cooperation as essential tools to bridge divides, reduce discrimination, and promote understanding across diverse communities.

Within this subtheme, respondents emphasised the importance of working together to overcome divisions and build stronger, more cohesive communities. The DLR Founder highlighted the potential of collaboration, explaining that “through working together, they [religious leaders] can overcome” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). This perspective was reinforced by the Orthodox Priest, who reflected on collective efforts to address social challenges, stating, “we cooperated together to fix and to be able to address certain types of problems on a social level among us. So, we must work together” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). These views underline the shared belief that unity requires joint efforts and sustained cooperation.

Sheik Sunni extended this idea, describing the transformative effect of collaboration, observing, “our work together in this diversity, I am not exaggerating if I say, that we become one, because each one can replace the other. We became cemented together. The idea is to believe and to build a beautiful synchronization” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This synchronisation, according to Sheik Alawid, must be grounded in respect for differences. He stressed the need for a thoughtful approach, remarking, “we need a very wise way, a decent way to work together and respect our differences” (personal communication, April 24, 2024).

Collaboration, however, is not confined to religious leaders. Broader networks, including municipalities, schools, and civil society, also play an essential role in fostering unity. Tutor A noted that “the municipalities work along with the church, the religious leader and the school director. They meet up to create a more integrated approach” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This collaborative model finds echoes in other initiatives aimed at promoting peace and protecting human rights. Student 3 added that “we work on activities and initiatives that aim to build peace, promote understanding and co-operation, and protect human rights” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). These reflections emphasise that effective cooperation often extends beyond religious spheres, incorporating multiple sectors to create sustainable and inclusive frameworks for dialogue.

Tutor A further reflected on the persistence required to sustain these efforts, remarking that “you do what you have to do, and then everything will fall in its place” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This perspective reinforces the idea that building unity is not an instant achievement but a gradual process that demands continuous engagement and trust in the long-term impact of collaboration.

Respondents also reflected on how shared narratives and interactive activities can foster understanding and break down barriers. The DLR Founder previously emphasised the importance of connecting young people to role models whose lives reflect resilience and coexistence, explaining that such figures provide “testimony through their own life” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). This highlights how personal stories can inspire others to reject radicalism and build meaningful connections.

Echoing this view, Tutor B described how summer camps created structured spaces where differences were initially met with hesitation but later embraced, saying that, “by the end of the camp, everyone is saying every prayer,” she recalled, illustrating how

shared activities can dismantle preconceptions and build bridges between participants (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Tutor A reinforced this perspective, reflecting on their own experiences of cultural exchange, “they were showing me their differences, and I was showing them my differences, but we were meeting together on our differences” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This process of mutual sharing allowed participants to accept each other as they were, strengthening bonds despite differences.

Building on this, Tutor A further described how structured discussions around religious traditions encouraged openness while maintaining boundaries, stating that “when we have, let’s say, Easter, we speak to them about our Easter, and they have Ramadan, they tell us about their experience just to be more open,” she explained, highlighting how such exchanges balanced respect for cultural traditions with curiosity and understanding (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Tutor C expanded this point, sharing how informal activities like football games played a role in transforming perceptions, “the refugees and police started to see each other differently” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This shift in perspective demonstrates how practical activities can complement structured dialogues to create a sense of unity.

These testimonies collectively illustrate how structured activities, personal exchanges, and informal interactions create spaces for meaningful dialogue and reconciliation. By encouraging participants to explore differences openly, respect traditions, and connect through shared experiences, respondents highlighted the transformative power of testimony in bridging divides and fostering cooperation.

Respondents acknowledged the dual role of Religious Leaders, both as spiritual guides and as educators grounded in practical experience. Tutor A reflected on their role, explaining that “some religious leaders are also doctors and teachers at universities. This makes them more credible, as they are based not only on religion but also on science and experience” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This intersection between faith and academic knowledge strengthens their influence, allowing them to engage with broader audiences.

Expanding on this, Tutor A also described how religious leaders shape narratives through their teachings, noting that “religious leaders, their role comes in their speeches. For example, the preacher explains the Bible from a humane way, less about Jesus said this, but more about how to integrate it into your life” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This approach highlights the importance of applying religious principles in practical

ways to address social issues, making religious teachings more accessible and relevant. Tutor C supported this view, arguing that:

The role is important, but just for two reasons: to discuss between us and the leaders of the religions, because there are many differences even between the same religions, and then to discuss with other religions to decrease hate and approach the point of view (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

Dialogue, however, was seen as a process requiring effort and responsibility. The DLR Founder emphasised the importance of creating spaces where religious leaders can come together, reflecting that:

In the DLR, we do the dialogue between the different religious leaders, we have them sit in the same space and discuss matters. When you have this understanding that we are all living for the same purpose, to be happy, to live a fulfilling life, because all religions teach you to be a good person (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024).

Despite recognising their influence, some respondents questioned whether religious leaders were fully aware of their potential impact. Tutor B remarked that systemic change depends on the leaders' ability to reflect critically on their actions and adapt their approaches. She stated that:

Religious leaders play a fundamental role. Do they play it well? I don't think so, but I am sure that if these people become aware and truly reflect on what they are doing, they can change everything. It's like a coup d'état, a metaphor. If these people change, everything below changes (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

Together, these perspectives highlight the role of religious leaders not only as guardians of tradition but also as agents of transformation. By combining spiritual teachings with practical knowledge, engaging in dialogue, and critically reflecting on their influence, religious leaders can help foster education, understanding, and reconciliation in divided societies.

b) Education and Sustainable Cooperation

This subtheme emerges as a critical component in fostering long-term peace and resilience within diverse and conflict-prone communities. Respondents highlighted how

education not only provides the foundation for equality and social cohesion but also acts as a tool to challenge radical ideologies and promote respect for diversity. Beyond formal and non-formal education, experiential learning and community-driven initiatives were recognised as essential strategies to build trust, cooperation, and sustainable practices.

The transformative potential of education in promoting inclusivity, dismantling discrimination, and fostering reconciliation is emphasized by respondents. They consider that education, when properly structured can address divisions and encourage respect for diversity. The Orthodox Priest reflected on the connection between education and culture, stating, “I will go back to education and culture... Our faith is encouraging and pushing toward respecting the other” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This perspective underscores the role of faith-based values in reinforcing tolerance and mutual respect within educational frameworks. Building on this, he further observed that “divisions are the sources of wars and conflicts, but education is the door for peace; it’s a possibility. We must use diversity to enrich rather than divide” (Orthodox Priest, semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This reflection frames education not only as a preventive measure against radicalism but also as a proactive tool to transform societal differences into opportunities for growth and cooperation. Sheik Alawid supported this view, emphasising the urgency of countering divisive ideologies, noting that “our mission is to overcome and to stop this type of ideologies and radicalization” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

For Student 1, the focus was on equality as the foundation for peacebuilding. He argued that “we should have all equal rights to not see others different from us, to be equal, equal rights, equal opportunities” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). This call for fairness highlights how inclusivity in education can dismantle prejudice and create pathways for understanding. Tutor A echoed this sentiment, insisting that “religion has nothing to do with schools. Schools have to be a representation of society. You have to treat everyone equally and just be open, open to everyone” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Her perspective underscores the importance of creating neutral educational spaces that reflect broader societal values and reject exclusionary practices.

However, Tutor A also pointed out the structural challenges in achieving this vision, observing that “once we fix the education system, everything will go hand in hand. The curriculum is outdated, teachers are underpaid, overworked, and struggling to survive” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This critique highlights the need for

systemic reform to modernise curricula and ensure teachers are equipped to deliver inclusive education effectively.

Together, these reflections demonstrate a shared belief in the power of education to promote equality and peace. They highlight the need for structural reforms, inclusive policies, and a focus on values that foster respect and cooperation. By addressing both ideological and systemic barriers, education emerges as a critical tool for sustainable peacebuilding and social transformation.

The importance of long-term strategies and grassroots involvement in sustaining peacebuilding is also emphasized. According to participants that initiatives need to go beyond short-term actions, focusing instead on creating frameworks that ensure continuity and community ownership. Sheik Sunni expressed concern about the fragility of existing projects, observing that “the initiatives are very strong, very good, very solid, but if they cannot go, there is no sustainability, and that’s not good” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This highlights the fear that without ongoing support, even promising initiatives risk losing their impact.

Echoing this concern, Tutor A stressed the importance of starting small, working at the local level before scaling up, explaining that “it starts with the municipalities because each village, each city has its own municipality... These activities should be done on a village base, and then once the villages are integrated, you can move on to the whole country” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This reflects a belief in the power of grassroots approaches as the building blocks for broader national cohesion. Tutor B supported this view by sharing a practical example of community involvement, recalling, “two weeks ago, we painted stairs with young people, all together in a way of cooperation. That’s a sign of cooperation in a simple task without prejudices” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Such activities, although small in scale, were seen as symbolic efforts to promote teamwork and mutual respect.

Looking to expand these initiatives, Tutor B proposed organising larger gatherings to sustain momentum and deepen engagement, suggesting that “I think we should have several workshops like Barcelona Days here, to invite all the young people” (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This call for broader participation reinforces the idea that sustainability relies not only on structured programmes but also on interactive events that encourage dialogue and cultural exchange.

Collectively, these reflections underline the importance of designing programmes that are not only impactful in the short term but also capable of evolving into sustainable structures. Respondents stressed that sustainability depends on building strong foundations at the community level while integrating larger-scale activities that engage youth and encourage ongoing participation.

Importance is also given to the role of collaborative activities and practical experiences in fostering cooperation, breaking down barriers, and building sustainable connections. Respondents emphasised that teamwork-based initiatives provide participants with opportunities to develop social bonds, overcome prejudices, and work towards shared goals. Tutor A drew a parallel between sports and cooperation, explaining that “soccer is based on teamwork; you cannot win if you're not working as a team” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This analogy underscores how focusing on collective objectives allows participants to set aside differences and develop mutual understanding through shared effort.

Building on this idea, Tutor B described how scouting activities create structured spaces for teamwork and collaboration from an early age. She observed that “when we put kids together in scouts, Muslims and Christians, and we let them play together, they learn teamwork and cooperation” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These initiatives enable participants to work towards common goals while learning to value diverse perspectives. Expanding on this, Tutor B further reflected on the dynamic roles developed in summer camps, explaining that:

In summer camps, you put a team together, and each one plays a role. A good team needs a leader, someone who cannot play the leader, and someone who is a recognised leader. When you mix them, they do a great job (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

This emphasis on role distribution demonstrates how experiential learning builds responsibility, leadership, and cooperation skills in a practical and engaging way.

While these activities promote teamwork and equality, respondents also highlighted the importance of extending these values beyond structured programmes. Student 4 suggested that “we should also conduct awareness campaigns for parents, so that they can sit down and teach their children not to discriminate between each other” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). This perspective reinforces the idea that building sustainable cooperation requires broader societal efforts, where families and schools play a central role in shaping attitudes. Tutor B’s reflections on teamwork complement

this point, demonstrating how structured activities, such as scouting and summer camps, can reinforce values of respect and inclusion that are first taught at home. The emphasis on involving families suggests a holistic approach, where experiential learning is supported by ongoing efforts to instil equality and mutual respect in everyday interactions.

The DLR Founder offered a broader reflection on the long-term impact of experiential learning, highlighting inspiring examples of personal transformation among participants. He explained that “evolution of people, people that pass by DLR and get wings and flew. I have a lot of examples... Some give up their job, a case of one engineer, to build peace among people, not just houses or buildings” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). This testimony underscores how programmes grounded in teamwork and cooperation can instill lasting values of peacebuilding, inspiring individuals to carry these principles into their professional and personal lives.

Together, these reflections demonstrate how teamwork and experiential learning create dynamic and impactful pathways to cooperation and understanding. By combining practical activities, role-based learning, and awareness initiatives, these programmes equip participants with the tools to overcome prejudices, strengthen relationships, and work collectively towards sustainable peacebuilding.

c) Beauty of Diversity and Religion

The subtheme highlights the potential of diversity as a unifying force, focusing on dialogue, education, and shared experiences to promote understanding and cooperation. Respondents emphasised that diversity should be seen as a strength rather than a barrier, with relationships across religious and cultural differences often providing deeper connections. Student 3 reflected on this, suggesting *that* “having friends from different than our religion is better than having a friend from the same religion that we are in. We don't need to defer” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Similarly, Student 2 supported this view, stating that “there is no problem and sometimes people have friends from other religions, and perhaps they help you more than people of your religion” (students focus group, April 23, 2024).

This openness to diversity was also reflected in Student 4’s experience, observing that “I think in our country there's no difference, in Lebanon we can be friends easily with someone else because we are in this country in Lebanon, we can be friends easily with everyone” (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Their remarks highlight a broader

cultural acceptance, even amidst Lebanon's history of divisions, suggesting that day-to-day interactions often transcend differences.

Tutor A reinforced this perspective, reflecting on the role of education in fostering dialogue and openness, sharing that “at school, we had people from different religions, people from all around the world. I was subjected to dialogue with people from many religions. It was very interesting to learn about their backgrounds” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This view aligns with Tutor C, who stressed the importance of integrating knowledge about diversity into the educational system, explaining that “students can learn about different religions and cultures. This way, they know others and make their own choices” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

Practical activities also played a role in promoting cooperation. Tutor B highlighted how teamwork breaks down barriers, noting that “when they're in a team, they forget their differences and work together” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This observation underscores how shared experiences, such as team-based activities, encourage participants to move beyond labels and focus on collective goals, promoting social cohesion through practical engagement.

Despite these positive examples, challenges remain. Sheik Sunni cautioned that “in some minds, unfortunately, there are still people that hesitate to build a dialogue and a real relationship with non-Muslims. This limited mindset is dangerous, especially if these people reach positions of decision-making” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). Sheik Alawid echoed this concern but emphasised that understanding differences is essential, remarking that “we know that we are different, this is normal. Nobody is totally identical, even inside the same group. But the understanding of these differences is key to overcoming challenges” (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

Reflecting on religious diversity, Tutor A shared insights from the DLR programme, where “religious leaders discuss their differences in the DLR. When you go down to the base, all the religions have the same mission and goals in life, but the strategies differ” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This demonstrates how structured dialogue and cooperation can build bridges, highlighting shared values while respecting differences in practices.

Together, these reflections demonstrate that diversity, when approached through education, dialogue, and shared experiences, has the potential to unite rather than

divide. Respondents stressed that while challenges remain, addressing biases and promoting cooperation through practical engagement and open conversations are key to transforming diversity into a source of strength.

d) Imagination and Creativity

This subtheme focus on the transformative role of creative and cooperative activities in promoting social cohesion and overcoming divisions. While some of the references included here have appeared in earlier sections, their repetition underscores the importance of imagining simple yet impactful solutions. These examples illustrate how creativity, when applied to shared experiences, can stimulate dialogue, foster empathy, and inspire small but meaningful transformations in peacebuilding efforts.

Respondents frequently pointed to activities such as sports and artistic collaborations as tools for promoting unity and inclusion. Tutor A reflected on the impact of sports, explaining that:

We have soccer tournaments around the district, young kids under 16 and above 16. These activities bring people together. You're exposed to new people, new friends. You're just focusing on the ball and the goal, not thinking about religion or culture (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024).

This idea resonates with Tutor B's experience of organising cooperative art projects, who shared that "two weeks ago, we painted stairs with young people, all together in a way of cooperation. It was a simple task, but it showed how we can work together without prejudices" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Both examples highlight how structured yet simple activities, whether competitive or collaborative, can become platforms for breaking down barriers and building connections.

Building on these practical examples, Tutor C described how theatrical activities were used to reshape perceptions and address biases. He explained that "we prepared a play with the police and the refugees. The discrimination from the police against the refugees decreased, and the point of view of the refugees about the police changed too" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This demonstrates how imaginative approaches, such as drama, not only create spaces for dialogue but also challenge stereotypes and transform relationships. Tutor B echoed this idea of transformation through experiential learning, recalling how "in scouts, we mix Muslim and Christian kids. By the end of the camp, you can see the change in their expressions as they start saying each other's prayers. It's

beautiful” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Both reflections highlight how experiential and symbolic activities nurture understanding and build emotional connections, bridging divides through shared moments.

Creativity was also viewed as a driver of innovation and renewal. Tutor A expressed hope that exposure to different ideas and experiences could inspire positive change, observing that “I hope people who left the country, seeking a better future, would come back with more innovative ideas and use them to improve the situation in Lebanon” (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This forward-looking perspective complements the emphasis on practical initiatives, suggesting that combining imagination with real-world experience can lead to sustainable solutions.

The DLR Founder reinforced this vision, advocating for stronger connections between youth and role models who have overcome adversity. He stated that “the more we connect young people to peacebuilders—people who have crossed bridges, overcome radicalism, hate speech, and challenges in their lives—the better results we will achieve” (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). This perspective emphasises the role of storytelling and lived experiences as sources of inspiration, encouraging young people to envision and pursue constructive alternatives.

Together, these reflections demonstrate that imagination and creativity, supported by practical actions and inspirational examples, can serve as powerful catalysts for social change. From sports and art to drama and shared rituals, respondents highlighted how simple, creative initiatives can build trust, reshape perceptions, and inspire broader peacebuilding efforts.

3.3. Peacebuilding Dimension Conclusion

The findings highlight the dual nature of peacebuilding: while historical divisions, socioeconomic inequalities, and entrenched prejudices continue to hinder sustainable peace, respondents identified tangible pathways to overcome these barriers. Education, dialogue, and structured cooperation emerged as fundamental tools in dismantling stereotypes and reducing radicalisation, reinforcing the role of learning as a driver of reconciliation.

Practical and experiential initiatives—ranging from interfaith dialogues to creative collaborations in sports and the arts—proved particularly effective in fostering empathy, mutual respect, and trust. These activities illustrate that peacebuilding is not an abstract ideal but a process rooted in intentional, collective action at multiple levels. The

testimonies gathered underscore that sustainable peace requires both systemic reforms and sustained grassroots engagement, where education serves as a cornerstone for long-term coexistence.

The next chapter will critically analyse these findings in relation to established theoretical frameworks, assessing their broader implications for countering extremism and fostering resilience through education and cooperative strategies.

CHAPTER VII

Discussion of Findings: Education and Peacebuilding Insights

1. Structuring the Discussion: Research Questions and Approach

The discussion of the results in this research is structured to progressively address the research questions, beginning with each of the main objectives, followed by their respective specific objectives, and culminating in a final reflection that responds to the central research question. This structure ensures a coherent and detailed analysis of the collected data, with theoretical perspectives integrated throughout the chapter to support the findings and interpretations.

It is essential to consider the historical context in which the interviews were conducted. The fieldwork took place during a period of silent conflict, characterised by political instability and socio-economic uncertainty⁶⁹. Navigating such an unpredictable environment required constant adaptability, shaping not only the data collection process but also the researcher's understanding of peace education in fragile settings. As reflected in my autoethnographic fieldnotes, "geopolitical dynamics have been constantly changing, leaving Lebanese daily life in an untenable limbo, between a socio-economic crisis that seems to have no end and covert conflicts in militarily strategic regions" (Researcher's Autoethnographic Fieldnotes, April 2024). This reality was not merely an abstract geopolitical backdrop but a tangible experience, where the apparent normality of daily routines coexisted with latent tensions, expressed in heightened security measures, whispered concerns, and the omnipresence of military forces. These observations reinforce the argument that peace education must operate within a framework that not only addresses theoretical constructs but also acknowledges the lived realities of instability shaping young people's perceptions and opportunities.

1.1. Factors Influencing Violent Extremist Discourse

With the establishment of the first main objective, we aim to address the following question:

"What are the factors that produce and reduce violent extremist discourse, and how can its spread be minimised through specific behaviours among young people?"

The analysis of the collected data reveals several factors contributing to the production and reduction of violent extremist discourse, as well as specific behaviours that can

⁶⁹ Since then, Lebanon has witnessed an escalation from silent conflict to active warfare on its territory, followed by a ceasefire. The subsequent appointment of General Joseph Khalil Aoun as President marked the end of the prolonged political vacuum that had persisted since October 2022, introducing a new phase of governance amidst ongoing uncertainty.

minimise its spread among young people. Non-formal education emerges as a key element in this process, providing tools to foster critical thinking, emotional resilience, and intercultural dialogue.

The study participants highlighted that violent extremist discourse is largely driven by structural factors such as political corruption, social and religious discrimination, and exposure to radical propaganda. Political corruption was identified as one of the primary catalysts for extremism. The Sheik Alawid stated, "because I started from a very long mindset, very long that politics have 80% influenced negatively on that" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024), illustrating the perception that the Lebanese political system has perpetuated inequalities and grievances that fuel radical narratives.

The emergence of radical vigilante groups, such as *Jnoud al-Rab* (Soldiers of the Lord), further illustrates how perceptions of insecurity can fuel exclusionary and extremist discourses. As observed during fieldwork in Ashrafieh:

With an imposing posture, they take voluntary shifts day and night on plastic chairs or sitting on walls or pavements to ensure that there are no transgressions against Christians. However, their actions have also led them to attack LGBT people gratuitously, as well as physically threatening LGBT nightclubs" (Researcher's Autoethnographic Fieldnotes, April 2024).

While such groups claim to protect their communities, their practices contribute to a climate of polarisation and intolerance, reinforcing sectarian divisions rather than fostering collective security. Bourdieu (1989) supports this analysis, stating that "power structures perpetuate inequalities that foster tensions and violence" (p. 25). This phenomenon demonstrates how, in contexts of weak state authority, non-state actors may assume the role of enforcers of social order, often through coercive and exclusionary means, exacerbating underlying tensions.

Other participants echoed this view, emphasising how corruption fuels societal fragmentation. This perspective is reflected in the Orthodox Priest's remark that education as a pathway to peace remains merely theoretical, as major powers with vested interests in Lebanon prioritise their own agendas over genuine peace efforts. His statement underscores how internal divisions are frequently manipulated by external actors, further deepening the country's challenges.

Discrimination, particularly against ethnic and religious minorities, was also identified as a critical factor. Tutor C shared: "when I was a student, I had many scholarships, but

I couldn't take them because I am Palestinian. You feel the discrimination" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024), illustrating how systemic exclusion can create frustration and increase vulnerability to extremist narratives. Agier (2018) describes this phenomenon as "a mechanism of systematic exclusion that intensifies grievances and increases susceptibility to extremism" (p. 97).

This reality is further reflected in Student 3's statement: "the policy, the politics and the bad mindset that people put in their mind that we are different" (students focus group, April 23, 2024), underlining how deeply rooted prejudices contribute to the construction of exclusionary identities. Goffman (1993) argues that such representations, by solidifying perceptions of difference, reinforce social divisions.

Extremist propaganda, particularly through social media, was another recurring concern. The DLR Founder warned: "young individuals are increasingly getting to different social media platforms that are promoting propaganda radicalism" (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024). Hanif et al. (2021) analyse this trend, emphasising that "the persuasive power of digital platforms facilitates the spread of violent ideologies among socially isolated youth" (p. 490). Social media platforms become channels for disseminating radical content, which resonates with the insecurities and frustrations of young people. Tutor A reinforced this point: "the bigger issue in my opinion, is the mentality. Crisis can bring people together... But people were standing in his way... who are supposed to feel for those people who have nothing to lose" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024), pointing to social precariousness as fertile ground for extremist discourse.

In contrast, the data indicate that violent extremist discourse can be mitigated through educational interventions, interfaith dialogue practices, and emotional support. Non-formal education proved to be an effective tool in promoting critical thinking, which is crucial for resisting ideological manipulation. Tutor A stated: "education gives you a bigger mind, an open mind, and understanding of others" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024), highlighting the impact of educational activities on deconstructing stereotypes. Freire (1967) underscores this aspect, arguing that "liberating education is essential to challenge oppressive structures and stimulate critical analysis of reality" (p. 45). This becomes particularly relevant in contexts where extremist narratives offer simplistic answers to complex realities. As the DLR Founder noted: "The strategies that I would recommend are the strategies that would connect them to peace builders, people who are able to cross the bridge to overcome difficulties, to overcome challenges, to overcome radicalism, to overcome hate speech, etc." (semi-structured interview, April 25, 2024).

Lederach (1997) suggests that building interfaith solidarity networks "promotes mutual recognition and fosters trust between historically divided communities" (p. 52). Tutor B echoed this by sharing: "Two weeks ago, we painted stairs with young people, all together in a way of cooperation. That's a sign of cooperation in a simple task without prejudices" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024), illustrating how simple community-based activities can counteract prejudices.

Emotional support was also identified as a critical preventive factor. Tutor B noted: "we are listeners more than speakers; sometimes just being there and listening helps them feel safe" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). This practice aligns with Agier's (2018) assertion that emotional support provides "a sense of safety that enhances individual resilience against hate discourse" (p. 145). Similarly, Tutor A observed: "at the end of the day, it is emotional support before it is educational support... So, you know, storytelling, daily discussions... like how was your day today... just to be more open, but obviously with boundaries" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024), demonstrating the importance of empathetic listening as a preventive strategy.

The creation of interfaith dialogue spaces was another highly effective strategy. Sheik Alawid emphasised: "we need an academic way to enlightened speech and to counteract radicalism and conflicts" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). Berger and Luckmann (2010) argue that social interactions contribute to constructing a shared reality based on mutual respect and cooperation. Tutor A reinforced this perspective: "we were showing me their differences, and I was showing them my differences, but we were meeting together on our differences" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024), illustrating the positive impact of intercultural interactions.

The data further suggest that certain educational practices and behaviours can help reduce extremist discourse, including collaborative activities, open dialogue, exposure to positive role models, and consistent emotional support. Tutor B shared: "when we put kids together in scouts, Muslims and Christians, and we let them play together, they learn teamwork and cooperation" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Bourdieu (1998) describes this as "the development of a collaborative habitus capable of challenging ingrained prejudices" (p. 65). Student 3 similarly remarked: "if we had more programs where we could discuss openly, maybe we would understand each other better" (students focus group, April 23, 2024), advocating for structured dialogue spaces, as also supported by Freire (2013), who argued that "consistent dialogue builds bridges of understanding and promotes active, critical citizenship" (p. 112).

In summary, the factors that produce and reduce violent extremist discourse are varied and interdependent. Political corruption, discrimination, and extremist propaganda were identified as primary drivers, while critical thinking, emotional support, and interfaith dialogue emerged as effective preventive mechanisms. Non-formal education, by integrating these dimensions, stands out as an essential tool in shaping a resilient youth capable of resisting ideological manipulation and contributing to a culture of peace.

1.1.1. Strategies to Reduce Youth Vulnerability to Extremism

With the aim of specifically exploring strategies that can reduce the vulnerability of younger generations to extremism, we will address the following question by discussing the obtained results.

What strategies can reduce the vulnerability of younger generations to manipulation, grooming, and forced recruitment by extremist groups through awareness-raising and education?

The vulnerability of young people to manipulation, grooming, and recruitment by extremist groups is a growing challenge, particularly in contexts marked by socio-economic adversity and latent religious tensions. The analysis of the collected data indicates that non-formal education, by promoting critical thinking skills, community engagement, and emotional support, serves as a key tool in reducing this vulnerability. Through participatory learning processes and inclusive dialogue, this educational approach offers young people a sense of belonging and protection against extremist narratives.

The development of critical thinking skills was consistently identified as one of the most effective strategies to prevent extremist recruitment. Tutor C highlighted the importance of an inclusive curriculum: "you can help them to add some ideas in the chapters, specifically the history about the civilizations... to open to the other, and to know the other specific in this" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Freire (2013) supports this notion, emphasising that "liberating education equips learners with the capacity to question and deconstruct ideological narratives" (p. 108). Similarly, Reardon (1988) asserts that critical and inclusive education is essential for developing a social consciousness capable of resisting extremism.

The impact of inclusive education in fostering critical thinking and resilience against extremist narratives was also evident in informal discussions with students at Notre

Dame University - Louaize. While many expressed aspirations for a more unified Lebanon, they also highlighted the frustrations of growing up in a political system dominated by sectarian divisions. One student remarked that "a lot of the fight politically in Lebanon has to do with religion," illustrating the challenges of dismantling entrenched divisions (Researcher's Autoethnographic Fieldnotes, April 2024). However, these same students recognised the value of their educational experiences in shaping a broader, more inclusive perspective. University spaces, by facilitating interactions between students from different religious and cultural backgrounds, provided an opportunity to challenge stereotypes and engage in dialogue. This reinforces the argument that non-formal education, by exposing young people to diverse perspectives, serves as a preventive mechanism against recruitment into extremist ideologies.

The promotion of awareness-raising campaigns was also highlighted as a crucial preventive measure. Student 1 suggested: "we could do awareness campaigns and let them know that there is no problem being with each other" (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Hanif et al. (2021) underscore this strategy, arguing that "educational campaigns that dismantle stereotypes and promote intercultural dialogue are essential for reducing the influence of extremist discourse" (p. 123). Sheik Alawid added: "we need an academic way to enlightened speech and to counteract radicalism and conflicts" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024), indicating that these initiatives should target both young people and adults to achieve a broader, long-lasting impact.

Community engagement emerged as another significant strategy. Tutor A shared the impact of initiatives that encourage interfaith dialogue: "at school, we had people from different religions, people from all around the world. I was subjected to dialogue with people from many religions... It was very interesting to learn about their backgrounds" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Berger and Luckmann (2010) explain that direct social interactions facilitate the construction of a shared social reality, which can counter extremist narratives that frame diversity as a threat. Lederach (1997) also highlights the importance of community-based activities in building connections and trust between different groups.

Emotional support was consistently mentioned as a cornerstone of successful prevention efforts. Tutor B explained: "we are listeners more than speakers. If there is something huge, we can call the school saying that these kids need special support" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Agier (2018) describes emotional support as "a stabilising factor that strengthens resilience against extremist narratives" (p. 138). Student 4 further

stressed the importance of family involvement in this process: "we should also conduct awareness campaigns for parents, so that they can sit down and teach their children not to discriminate between each other" (students focus group, April 23, 2024). By involving parents, schools, and community members, these initiatives build a more cohesive and supportive environment for young people.

Interactive educational activities were also identified as particularly effective in fostering teamwork and mutual respect. Tutor A shared an example: "we have soccer tournaments around the district, young kids under 16 and above 16... These activities bring people together. You're exposed to new people, new friends. You're just focusing on the ball and the goal, not thinking about religion or culture" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Freire (2013) argues that "education that creates meaningful interactions helps participants develop a critical consciousness that resists divisive narratives" (p. 112).

In sum, the data suggest that reducing young people's vulnerability to extremist narratives requires educational strategies that combine critical thinking, community engagement, emotional support, and interactive activities. Non-formal education, by providing safe and inclusive spaces for learning, emerges as a practical and effective tool for preventing extremist recruitment.

1.2. Solidarity, Cooperation, and Reconciliation in Peacebuilding

The second main objective is now addressed to answer the following question:

"What role do solidarity, cooperation, and reconciliation play in building peace in religiously diverse societies vulnerable to conflict, using non-formal education?"

The analysis reveals that solidarity, cooperation, and reconciliation are fundamental to peacebuilding in religiously diverse societies vulnerable to conflict. Through non-formal education, these elements become essential mechanisms for fostering inclusion, reducing tensions, and promoting mutual understanding among historically divided communities. The apparent inter-religious conflicts in Lebanon, as evidenced by the participants' experiences, highlight the importance of practices rooted in these values for mitigating divisions, dismantling prejudices, and strengthening social cohesion.

Solidarity emerges from the data as a central pillar for social cohesion, often described by interviewees as a crucial tool in bridging divides. Tutor C shared a particularly illustrative initiative: "we prepared a play with the police and the refugees. The discrimination from the police against the refugees decreased, and the point of view of the refugees about the police changed too" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This

example demonstrates also the power of cooperative activities, closely intertwined with solidarity in breaking down prejudices and fostering closer relationships between groups historically marked by distrust. Lederach (2005) reinforces this notion, arguing that "peacebuilding depends on the ability to build bridges through actions that promote empathy and mutual understanding" (p. 94).

An example of lived solidarity was observed both in community initiatives and religious practices, demonstrating how collective action and moral leadership can foster reconciliation. At Mariam's Cuisine, volunteers from different faith backgrounds worked together to support vulnerable communities, aligning with Freire's (2013) notion that solidarity must be an active, transformative force in social contexts. Similarly, the memorial service for Pascal Sleiman illustrated how solidarity manifests in times of grief, balancing justice with reconciliation. As I observed during the seventh-day mass,

people entered the church not only with sorrow for the situation and the years stolen from a family with three children, but also with gestures that reflected unity, communion, and solidarity, transporting faith to a scenario of forgiveness (Researcher's Autoethnographic Fieldnotes, April 2024).

This public expression of solidarity was later reinforced by Pascal's widow, whose call for peace prevented escalations of sectarian violence, demonstrating that acts of reconciliation, even in profound loss, can counteract cycles of retribution and foster coexistence. Such moments reinforce the idea that sustainable peace requires both structural and interpersonal efforts, where education, dialogue, and moral leadership play a fundamental role in overcoming historical divisions. Community-based activities that bring together diverse social groups not only cultivate solidarity but also reshape perceptions of the "other", strengthening the foundations for long-term peace.

However, building solidarity requires sustained and consistent efforts. The Sheik Alawid pointed out: "if the site is able to counteract, overcome the social, economic, financial situation challenges, then we can erase radicalism" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This statement highlights the importance of context-specific initiatives that address the underlying socio-economic challenges. Freire (2013) supports this perspective, asserting that "solidarity is an act of commitment to collective liberation, requiring a critical and responsible stance from both educators and communities" (p. 102). Educational projects that encourage shared experiences, mutual support, and the recognition of common vulnerabilities thus become essential instruments for peacebuilding.

The involvement of local authorities also emerged as a critical factor for the success of these initiatives. Tutor A explained: "the municipalities work along with the church, the religious leader, and the school director... They meet up to create a more integrated approach" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Berger and Luckmann (2010) argue that "social reality is constructed through the continuous interaction between individuals and institutions" (p. 58). Solidarity, therefore, extends beyond peer relationships to encompass the development of institutional networks committed to peace. The Orthodox Priest reinforced this by saying: "we cooperated together to fix and to be able to address certain types of problems on a social level among us. So, we must work together" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). This broader cooperation is indispensable for overcoming structural barriers and ensuring the longevity of peace-promoting initiatives.

Cooperation also stands out as a key factor in conflict mitigation and social cohesion. Tutor B provided an example: "when we put kids together in scouts, Muslims and Christians, and we let them play together, they learn teamwork and cooperation" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This illustrates how shared activities help dismantle identity-based barriers, aligning with Reardon's (1988) assertion that "cooperative learning creates meaningful experiences that promote positive interdependence among participants" (p. 102). The Orthodox Priest similarly noted: "we cooperated together to fix and to be able to address certain types of problems on a social level among us. So, we must work together" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024), reinforcing the potential of community-based activities to foster a culture of cooperation and mutual respect.

Tutor A also described the impact of practical activities on promoting cooperation: "so, you know, soccer is based on teamwork; you cannot win if you're not working as a team. You forget your identity, your name, your culture, your religion, and you are just focusing on the ball and the goal" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This account demonstrates how seemingly simple activities allow young people to experience teamwork and trust across religious boundaries. Bourdieu (1986) describes social capital as "the network of relationships that provides access to shared resources and promotes a sense of belonging within a community" (p. 249), emphasising the positive impact of activities that encourage cooperation between youth from different religious backgrounds.

Reconciliation, a crucial stage in the peacebuilding process, involves the capacity to overcome historical traumas and entrenched prejudices. The Sheik Alawid highlighted

the need for a sensitive and respectful approach: "we need a very wise way, a decent way to work together and respect our differences" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024). Lederach (1997) argues that "reconciliation requires spaces for authentic dialogue where parties can recognise and validate each other's suffering" (p. 55). Tutor A shared an example of this principle in practice: "in the DLR, we do the dialogue between the different religious leaders, we have them sit in the same space and discuss matters... when you have this understanding that we are all living for the same purpose" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). This illustrates how interfaith dialogue can deconstruct stereotypes and foster genuine, trust-based relationships.

Moral imagination and creativity also play a significant role in promoting reconciliation. Tutor B recalled a particularly poignant activity: "in scouts, we mix Muslim and Christian kids. By the end of the camp, you can see the change in their expressions as they start saying each other's prayers. It's beautiful" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Such experiences help build positive memories and relationships, reinforcing Freire's (2013) belief that "liberating education occurs when individuals engage with one another on an equal and respectful basis" (p. 76).

Tutor B further emphasised the role of community activities in fostering positive relationships: "I think we should have several workshops, like Barcelona days here, to invite all the young people" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024), underscoring the importance of creating spaces that facilitate genuine cultural exchange. Lederach (2005) supports this idea, asserting that "sustained dialogue over time strengthens trust and allows for the development of long-term, peaceful relationships" (p. 120).

Overall, the data demonstrate that solidarity, cooperation, and reconciliation, when promoted through non-formal educational practices, serve as fundamental pillars for sustainable peacebuilding in societies marked by religious diversity. Community involvement, collaborative activities, and spaces for authentic dialogue are essential strategies for strengthening social cohesion and mitigating intercommunal conflicts. Non-formal education, by fostering critical thinking, empathy, and dialogue, provides practical tools for building bridges across historical divides and promoting peaceful coexistence based on mutual respect and cooperation.

1.2.1. Non-Formal Education and Interfaith Dialogue

Next, a more detailed examination of the role of non-formal education and interreligious dialogue in promoting a culture of peace will be presented, in order to address the following question:

How can non-formal education contribute to a culture of peace by mitigating school dropout rates and promoting interfaith dialogue for harmonious coexistence?

Non-formal education has been recognised as a key mechanism for mitigating school dropout and promoting interfaith dialogue in societies vulnerable to conflict. The collected data indicate that flexible educational programmes, combined with interactive and culturally relevant approaches, play a crucial role in fostering a culture of peace by providing young people with a sense of belonging and opportunities for participation.

The flexibility of non-formal education stands out as a determining factor in reducing dropout rates, especially among young people facing socio-economic challenges. Tutor C noted: "there is awareness session and many NGOs in the camps make awareness session training" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024), underlining the importance of supplementary educational support in refugee camps and marginalised communities. Student 1 added: "education gives you a bigger mind, an open mind, and understanding of the world and an understanding of others to look at the person as a human first" (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Giddens (2004) argues that exposure to diverse cultural narratives strengthens social cohesion and helps prevent educational disengagement.

Cultural and social activities were also highlighted as significant contributors to the success of these programmes. Tutor A shared that "our curriculum included stories from different places and lessons from different countries. It was interesting to learn about those different cultures... It exposes you to different people, to different cultures" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). These initiatives align with Freire's (2013) perspective that "education should promote encounters between different groups to foster mutual respect and understanding" (p. 76).

The role of family and community in supporting educational engagement was another prominent theme in the data. Student 4 emphasised: "we should also conduct awareness campaigns for parents, so that they can sit down and teach their children not to discriminate between each other. The biggest role of teachers is to ensure that the information is reassuring to the students" (students focus group, April 23, 2024). Freire (2013) supports this notion, asserting that "education must involve the broader community to achieve transformative results" (p. 102).

The promotion of interfaith dialogue was also identified as a critical element in building a culture of peace. The Orthodox Priest explained: "our faith is encouraging and support and push toward respecting the other" (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

However, not all interfaith initiatives lead to meaningful or lasting change. As the Sheikh Sunni critically observed,

I have been with other religious leaders, and I have been invited to many, many, many events in five-star hotels, with big budget, big ceremonies, red carpet. But it finished immediately at the same place. It was a lot of protocols, but nothing sustainable (semi-structured interview, April 24, 2024).

This perspective highlights the risk of dialogue becoming performative rather than transformative, reinforcing the need for sustained, community-driven initiatives rather than symbolic events with no real impact. Tutor C added: "you can open the discussion about their own civilization, their own culture, and not to talk about the French civilization" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024), highlighting the importance of valuing local cultures to foster understanding and respect. Lederach (2005) argues that "interfaith dialogue should begin in childhood to establish the foundations of mutual trust and cooperation" (p. 94).

Interfaith dialogue was also evident during an interfaith meeting at a private Christian school, where discussions sought to bridge religious divides. The event highlighted both the potential of such initiatives and the challenges of fostering genuine interreligious cooperation in a deeply divided society. Religious leaders reinforced the importance of mutual understanding and sustained dialogue, drawing upon biblical and Quranic teachings to advocate for peaceful coexistence (Researcher's Autoethnographic Fieldnotes, April 2024). While students participated with respect, their engagement often reflected familiarity with the discourse rather than deep personal involvement, suggesting that interfaith education must extend beyond theoretical discussions. To be truly transformative, such initiatives should incorporate interactive, real-world experiences that encourage participants to engage meaningfully with those from different faith backgrounds, fostering relationships that challenge prejudices and strengthen social cohesion.

Interactive initiatives, such as intercultural camps, were also shown to be effective in promoting dialogue and mutual respect. Tutor B described a memorable experience: "in the first days of the summer camp, everyone is like, 'What is this prayer?' But by the end of the camp, everyone is saying every prayer. It's amazing when you see that" (tutors focus group, April 23, 2024). Reardon (1988) supports this approach, arguing that "shared experiences in informal settings create bonds that dismantle prejudices and promote long-term understanding" (p. 105).

Finally, the need to rethink educational structures to ensure inclusivity was highlighted in the participants' narratives. Tutor A voiced frustration with the rigidity of the formal curriculum: "Lebanon is known for its education. Since we were young, we were told that Lebanon has very good education. But as I grew up, and as I studied the education [...] I realised that our curriculum sucks. It sucks because there are no equal opportunities for everyone" (tutors focus group, Abril 23, 2024). Bourdieu (1998) describes this issue as the reproduction of structural inequalities, advocating for more flexible, inclusive educational models.

In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that non-formal education plays a crucial role in mitigating school dropout rates and promoting interfaith dialogue. Through flexible curricula, interactive learning experiences, community involvement, and family engagement, this educational approach helps foster a culture of peace grounded in mutual respect, cooperation, and shared understanding.

Conclusion

This analysis concludes by reflecting on the central research question, which asks: *How can non-formal education, anchored in solidarity in contexts of adversity and vulnerability to conflict, reduce religious extremism and promote reconciliation towards a culture of peace?*

This educational approach offers a flexible, adaptive response to settings marked by inter-religious tensions, structural inequalities, and mutual distrust. It creates safe spaces for dialogue, cooperation, and shared learning, mitigating the factors that fuel extremism while fostering social cohesion as the foundation for a sustainable peace.

The adaptability of non-formal education distinguishes it as an effective tool for peacebuilding, as it facilitates contextualised learning that resonates with the lived experiences of young people in vulnerable settings. Fahed and Daou (2021) highlight how interfaith dialogue and shared traditions can foster mutual understanding and challenge narratives of division. This aligns with the findings of this study, which underscore how non-formal education, when rooted in solidarity, strengthens intergroup reconciliation and critical engagement with extremist ideologies.

Solidarity stands out as a pivotal element in fostering intergroup reconciliation. Educational practices rooted in cooperative activities and shared experiences break down social barriers, encouraging empathy and mutual understanding. These practices

align with the perspective that peace is built in relational spaces where trust is cultivated, and differences are acknowledged without fear or prejudice.

This shared human experience finds resonance in religious teachings that, despite theological distinctions, converge around principles of peace, compassion, and coexistence. As the Bible states, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9), while the Quran reminds us, "And do not forget to show kindness to one another, for Allah sees all that you do" (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:237). These sacred teachings provide a moral and spiritual foundation for solidarity and dialogue, challenging narratives of division and violence.

The importance of this interfaith convergence is reflected in the joint declaration by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Al-Tayyeb (2019), which emphasises the need to adopt dialogue as the primary path to understanding, with cooperation as a guiding principle and mutual respect as a core standard. This document underscores the shared commitment of religious leaders to counter extremism and promote peaceful coexistence, highlighting that genuine faith does not incite violence or exclusion but instead fosters fraternity and compassion across religious, cultural, and ethnic boundaries.

Emotional support and critical thinking emerge as complementary elements in this process. Theoretical contributions highlight how emotional support can provide stability, enabling individuals to cope with adversity and resist narratives of hatred. In parallel, critical thinking, nurtured through non-formal education, equips individuals with the skills necessary to deconstruct ideological manipulation. Educational practices that promote dialogue, question assumptions, and encourage analytical reflection contribute to this objective.

The philosophical insights of Thomas Aquinas provide an intellectual framework for understanding the educational potential of faith in peacebuilding. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argues that "reason, illuminated by faith, enables individuals to grasp higher truths regarding existence and coexistence" (ST I, q.1, a.6). This assertion reinforces the idea that interfaith dialogue can transcend dogmatic differences when guided by reason and shared moral values, fostering a cooperative spirit among diverse religious communities.

Community engagement also stands out as an effective strategy for promoting interfaith understanding. Educational initiatives that encourage participation in collective activities foster a sense of shared purpose, reducing prejudices and strengthening

communal bonds. This perspective resonates with the assertion that social realities are shaped through interaction, as individuals learn to appreciate cultural and religious diversity through practical, cooperative experiences.

One compelling example of this lived solidarity is Mariam's Cuisine, a grassroots initiative that emerged after the Beirut Port explosion. Providing free meals, clothing, and psychological support to those in need, regardless of religion or nationality, it exemplifies how acts of everyday solidarity strengthen communal bonds and foster peacebuilding. As I noted in my reflections, "Lebanese solidarity manages to overcome religious differences, it manages to dream up new realities, just as the fingers of an oud glide over the strings, drawing out new melodies" (Researcher's Autoethnographic Fieldnotes, April 2024). These initiatives show that peace is not just an abstract ideal but a process embedded in human relationships and collective action. The ability of non-formal educational spaces to foster empathy and resilience reinforces the notion that true peace is not only learned but socially and spiritually constructed.

Ultimately, the analysis supports the conclusion that non-formal education, when anchored in solidarity, cooperation, and reconciliation, can significantly reduce religious extremism and foster interfaith reconciliation. Through practical, dialogue-driven educational experiences, individuals develop the skills and attitudes necessary to challenge divisive narratives and contribute to a culture of peace.

This research introduces the concept of the *Soul of Peace* as a contribution to Peace Studies, providing a lens through which to understand how non-formal education can foster reconciliation and counter religious extremism. The analysed data demonstrate that peace is not a static outcome but a dynamic process, socially and spiritually constructed through lived experiences of solidarity, empathy, and collective volition. Inspired by Lederach's (2005) reflections on the *soul of place* and the intricate network of human connections that sustains peace, this perspective suggests that peacebuilding relies on a shared social fabric, woven through interfaith dialogue, cooperative action, and emotional support.

This perspective was shaped by the values and practices observed in the work of Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR) in Lebanon, which illustrates the transformative potential of non-formal education in contexts of religious and cultural diversity. It was also influenced by the testimonies and reflections of the interviewees, who highlighted the importance of solidarity and dialogue in mitigating extremist narratives.

The relevance of this process is echoed in the *Document on Human Fraternity*, which emphasises that peace transcends religious boundaries and is rooted in authentic dialogue and cooperation: "Religions never incite war, hatred, or violence. Such calamities stem from deviations from religious teachings and from the exploitation of faith for political purposes" (p. 5). This declaration reinforces the shared responsibility of educational, religious, and community leaders in promoting peace through sustained interfaith engagement. In this context, non-formal education emerges as an essential space for this transformative interaction, creating opportunities for participants to experience the *Soul of Peace* through shared narratives and mutual understanding.

Thus, this research demonstrates that peacebuilding extends beyond the implementation of educational policies and requires a model that acknowledges the social and spiritual dimensions of reconciliation. Inspired by the testimonies of participants, the work of DLR, and the theoretical foundations of Berger and Luckmann (2010), Durkheim (1996), and Lederach (2005), this study offers the *Soul of Peace* as a conceptual contribution to the field of peace education.

Rather than presenting a definitive conclusion, this research invites further reflection on how non-formal education can be strategically integrated into broader peacebuilding initiatives. With this in mind, the next chapter further develops the *Soul of Peace* approach, exploring how human interaction, emotional solidarity, and interfaith dialogue contribute to a socially and spiritually constructed peace.

EPILOGUE

Contributions to a New Theoretical Framework

1. Introduction: The Soul of Peace, as Humane Construction for Sustainable Peace

Throughout this research, it has become evident that peace is not merely the absence of violence but a complex and dynamic process, continuously shaped by human interactions, cultural narratives, and collective volition. In societies marked by deep-rooted divisions, such as Lebanon, peacebuilding cannot rely solely on political agreements or formal education initiatives. Rather, it must be socially and spiritually constructed, emerging from shared experiences of reconciliation, empathy, and cooperation.

This chapter introduces "The Soul of Peace", a theoretical framework that emerges from the findings of this research and aims to deepen our understanding of how non-formal education can foster sustainable peace. Inspired by the concept of the "social construction of reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 2010), as well as Lederach's (2005) reflections on the "soul of place", this approach suggests that peace is more than an institutional or structural achievement. Instead, it possesses a symbolic, relational, and spiritual dimension, woven into the social fabric of communities through interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange, and collective resilience.

Building on Durkheim's (1996) insights into social cohesion and the role of belief systems, this framework proposes that peace is not a static goal, but rather a living entity, sustained through ongoing social interactions, rituals of reconciliation, and shared moral imagination. The reference to animism in this context does not imply a traditional religious framework, but rather follows Durkheim's understanding that belief systems, symbols, and collective rituals play a fundamental role in reinforcing social bonds and shaping group identities. Just as the "soul of place" reflects the identity and historical memory of a community, the "Soul of Peace" embodies the collective will to overcome conflict and sustain harmonious coexistence.

This perspective, shaped by the empirical findings of this study, particularly the work of Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR) in Lebanon, demonstrates how non-formal education serves as a platform where the "Soul of Peace" can be cultivated, nurtured, and transmitted across generations.

In the following sections, I develop this framework by exploring:

- The theoretical foundations of the "Soul of Peace", examining its links to social constructionism, collective volition, and the role of belief systems in social cohesion.

- The conceptual distinction between "Culture of Peace", "Sustainable Peace", and "Soul of Peace", highlighting how this framework expands the understanding of peace beyond structural and institutional approaches.
- The empirical application of this proposal, particularly in the Lebanese context, illustrating how initiatives like DLR actively construct the "Soul of Peace" through non-formal education.
- The fragility and resilience of the "Soul of Peace", demonstrating that it is not a fixed or guaranteed state, but rather a process that must be continuously reinforced and renewed.

Ultimately, this chapter presents "The Soul of Peace" as both a theoretical innovation and a practical tool for understanding peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies. By positioning peace as a socially and spiritually constructed phenomenon, this framework offers new insights into the transformative power of education, dialogue, and collective action in mitigating extremism and fostering reconciliation.

2. Theoretical Foundations of the Soul of Peace

As this research reaches its conclusion, and inspired by the Lebanese reality, I seek to connect two essential dimensions for understanding societies fragmented by diversity and for envisioning solutions to promote a culture of peace. Grounded in Berger and Luckmann's (2010) theory of the "social construction of reality", this section develops a new conceptual approach that emerged from an in-depth analysis of the Lebanese context: the social construction of the soul of peace. At first glance, the combination of these concepts may appear abstract, however, this proposal is the result of an intersection between social constructionism, human volition, and the fundamental role of religion and symbolic belief systems in social cohesion.

Durkheim (1996) explores how collective beliefs shape social cohesion, particularly through rituals, shared values, and symbolic systems. One of his key contributions is the study of how societies construct meaning through religious and cultural frameworks, which, in turn, strengthen collective identity and solidarity. While Durkheim's use of "animism" refers to the belief that objects, places, and beings possess a "soul" or spirit, my application of this concept is more metaphorical and sociological, reflecting how communities attribute a shared "spirit" or essence to their collective peace efforts. In this sense, peace is not merely a legal or political agreement, but a social force that must be

continually animated through human interactions, rituals of reconciliation, and shared narratives of cooperation.

From this standpoint, religion plays a central role in the social construction of the "Soul of Peace". Beyond legitimising social norms and values, religion provides a moral and spiritual narrative that sustains social cohesion. Thus, peace becomes more than just a political or social objective, it acquires a deeper, symbolic dimension, a "soul" that permeates society and is continually recreated through daily interactions, interfaith dialogues, and rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Lederach (2005), in the chapter *"On Web Watching: Finding the Soul of Place"*, introduces the idea that every place has a "soul", formed by the networks of social and historical relationships that shape communal life. In the case of Lebanon, a country profoundly marked by religious and cultural divisions, the soul of a place reflects the complex interconnections between its communities. Peacebuilding, therefore, is not simply about ending violence, it requires understanding and mobilising these networks, reinforcing shared identity, and reactivating peace as a lived, relational experience. The "Soul of Peace", in this sense, emerges as a reflection of human interactions, shared histories, and the collective will to transcend conflict.

Considering Berger and Luckmann's (2010) concept of volition, it is possible to associate the "Soul of Peace" with the human capacity to act intentionally. Volition, the power of conscious choice, plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals and communities construct and sustain peace. Unlike traditional peace models that assume peace as a natural by-product of stable institutions, this framework suggests that peace does not arise automatically, it requires deliberate decisions, courageous choices, and sustained engagement in social cohesion and dialogue.

Within this framework, collective volition, which I term the "ground of the soul", serves as the driving force behind the construction and endurance of peace. Just as the soul of a living being requires intentional actions to thrive, peace depends on continuous reaffirmation through cooperation, ethical engagement, and relational commitment.

However, as Lederach (2005) highlights, peacebuilding is inherently uncertain and involves risk. The "mystery of risk" reflects the reality that peace, like the "soul" of a society, is never guaranteed, it must be continually recreated, maintained, and renegotiated. The social interactions that sustain peace are always vulnerable to

disruption, making the "Soul of Peace" a fragile yet essential construction, requiring constant renewal and collective effort. Yet, paradoxically, this very risk is what renders peace a living, evolving force, a process continuously shaped by the volition and engagement of those who choose to uphold it.

2.1. Culture of Peace, Sustainable Peace, and Soul of Peace: Key Distinctions

It is important to clarify the distinction between Culture of Peace, Sustainable Peace, and Soul of Peace, as each represents a distinct yet interconnected approach to peacebuilding. The Culture of Peace refers to a set of practices, norms, and policies that promote non-violent conflict resolution, focusing on education, dialogue, and mediation (Galtung, 1996; UNESCO, 1999). This approach aims to create a social structure that favours peace through public policies, intercultural dialogue, and institutional frameworks.

Sustainable Peace, in contrast, goes beyond educational and social initiatives by focusing on long-term stability, governance, and economic resilience (Lederach, 2005; UN SDG 16). It seeks to prevent conflict relapse by ensuring strong political institutions, economic inclusion, and structural reforms that sustain peace at the state level. The Soul of Peace, as developed in this concept, introduces a deeper and more symbolic dimension of peace. It transcends institutional and political practices by emphasising the spiritual and social construction of peace, emerging from everyday interactions, rituals of reconciliation, and collective volition. While the Culture of Peace focuses on tangible actions and Sustainable Peace relies on governance structures, the Soul of Peace functions as the vital force that unites and animates⁷⁰ a community, making peace a living and evolving entity rather than a static outcome.

The following table summarises the key distinctions between these three concepts:

| Aspect | Culture of Peace | Sustainable Peace | Soul of Peace |
|-------------------|--|--|--|
| Definition | A system of practices, norms, and policies that promote non-violent conflict resolution. | A long-term peace strategy ensuring social, economic, and political stability. | A spiritual and social construct, continuously reinforced by human volition, ethics, and relational practices. |
| Main Focus | Institutional, structural, and | Governance, economic resilience, | Moral, spiritual, and relational transformation |

⁷⁰ The verb *animate*, from Latin *animare* (to give soul, to enliven), derives from *anima*, meaning soul or vital spirit. Beyond mere organisation, *animating a community* means infusing it with life—shaping shared meanings, rituals, and identity. To animate a community is to give it a soul, fostering cohesion and belonging.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | educational mechanisms to prevent conflict. | and institutional reforms to sustain peace. | through creativity, education, and faith-based cooperation. |
| Key Mechanisms | Laws, policies, human rights advocacy, and peace education. | Strong institutions, economic stability, and social justice reforms. | Rituals, interfaith dialogue, reconciliation, and collective moral imagination. |
| Nature of Peace | A goal to be achieved through structural changes. | A long-term outcome, dependent on governance and economic progress. | A dynamic and evolving force, requiring continuous renewal, volition, and deep-rooted relational commitment. |
| Role of the Community | Individuals participate within an institutional and educational framework. | Peace is state-driven, with institutions maintaining order and justice. | Peace is sustained through human interactions, ethical engagement, and shared emotional and spiritual practices. |
| Resilience to Conflict | Relies on education, advocacy, and policy implementation. | Depends on institutional strength, economic inclusion, and legal | Requires constant renewal, adaptability, and collective volition, as peace is fragile and must be nurtured at personal and community levels. |
| Theoretical Foundations | Structural peace models (Galtung, 1996; UNESCO, 1999). | Governance and conflict transformation frameworks (Lederach, 2005; UN SDG 16). | Social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 2010), religious and social cohesion (Durkheim, 1996), "soul of place" (Lederach, 2005), volitional ethics and faith-based reasoning (Aquinas, 2005). |

Figure 22 - Culture of Peace, Sustainable Peace and Soul of Peace Keys

By combining the insights of Durkheim, Berger and Luckmann (2010), and Lederach (2005), we can conclude that peace is both a social construction and a symbolic-spiritual manifestation. The Soul of Peace emerges as a collective force, shaped by social interactions, religious and cultural narratives, and ongoing efforts to maintain dialogue and cooperation.

Durkheim (1996) argues that religious belief systems play a central role in shaping social cohesion by providing shared rituals, moral frameworks, and collective symbols. One of his key contributions is the study of how societies attribute a "spirit" or essence to their collective identities through religious and social structures.

While animism, in its traditional definition, refers to the idea that objects, places, and beings possess a "soul", in this context, I adopt a broader interpretation. The "Soul of

Peace" does not refer to animism as a separate religious system, but rather to the way in which religious traditions, whether Christianity, Islam, or other faiths, help sustain a collective peace ethos. This ethos animates the social fabric of communities through rituals, interfaith dialogue, and moral imagination. Just as religious beliefs shape a community's moral and ethical foundation, they also serve as a source of resilience, trust, and reconciliation, essential elements in the construction of sustainable peace.

The Soul of Peace emerges as a living force that is sustained through shared narratives, ethical engagement, and the collective moral imagination of communities. This perspective positions peace as an entity that must be continually reaffirmed, much like the rituals and traditions that sustain collective identity in societies. Just as the soul gives vitality to a being, the Soul of Peace provides cohesion and resilience to a community, ensuring that peace remains an active, relational process rather than a passive state.

The Soul of Peace, therefore, is not only a socially constructed reality but also an intentional and continuous choice by a community. It is kept alive by the collective will and conscious action of individuals who choose cooperation, dialogue, and overcoming divisions. Ultimately, this "soul" represents a society's commitment to peace, symbolising a vital force that, like the soul of an animate being, must be cared for, nurtured, and protected so that it can thrive and give life to the community that sustains it.

Lebanon, deeply influenced by religious ideologies, offers a critical case study for the application of the Soul of Peace. While religious traditions seek peace, justice and happiness, they can also be vulnerable to misinterpretation and instrumentalisation for political and sectarian interests.

According to the Social Construction of the Soul of Peace, three key factors must be combined to minimise vulnerability to extremism and conflict:

- The Social Construction of Reality - Recognising that peace is shaped by daily interactions and shared narratives.
- Human Volition - Understanding that peace is not automatic, but rather a conscious and collective decision.
- The Role of Religious Traditions in Social Cohesion – Exploring how rituals, faith-based initiatives, and moral imagination sustain social harmony.

These principles are demonstrated by Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR), whose work in Lebanon highlights how peace can be cultivated through interfaith dialogue, reconciliation practices, and educational initiatives. The DLR's efforts prove that peacebuilding goes beyond structural reforms, requiring a deep commitment to relational and ethical engagement, an embodiment of the Soul of Peace in practice.

This conceptual distinction highlights how the Soul of Peace introduces a necessary evolution in peace studies. While structural approaches to peace (Culture of Peace and Sustainable Peace) focus on political, economic, and educational stability, they do not fully account for the inner, relational, and spiritual dimensions of peacebuilding. By recognising that peace is fragile yet resilient, and that it requires continuous renewal through moral and ethical engagement, the Soul of Peace offers a new paradigm, one that sees peace as a living force, constantly shaped by human volition, creativity, and deep relational bonds.

2.2. Collective Volition, the "Ground of the Soul"

The metaphor of collective volition as the "ground of the soul" serves as a powerful and essential framework within this new approach to the "social construction of the soul of peace". This concept reinforces the idea that peace is not sustained merely by aspirations or ideals, but by a collective foundation that is continuously built, negotiated, and tested. However, this "ground" is not unshakable, it is inherently fragile, requiring constant reinforcement, adaptation, and renewal.

While the "Soul of Peace" represents the symbolic, spiritual, and relational dimensions of peace, the "Ground of the Soul" provides the structural foundation that supports it. However, just as a physical ground can be unstable, eroded, or disrupted by external forces, so too can the "Ground of the Soul" be weakened by social division, mistrust, and the resurgence of conflict narratives. This concept aligns with Berger and Luckmann's (2010) theory of the social construction of reality, where human volition—the capacity to act and transform social contexts—serves as the force that materialises and sustains social interactions. Yet, peace, though socially constructed, is never fully secured, it remains vulnerable to the unpredictability of human choices, external pressures, and historical grievances.

Incorporating Durkheim's (1996) reflections on religion and social cohesion, the "Ground of the Soul" can also be understood as a moral and ethical infrastructure that is at once sustaining and fragile. Durkheim argues that religion and collective rituals

strengthen social solidarity, yet these same structures can be co-opted, instrumentalised, or eroded by competing ideologies and political tensions. In this sense, the "Ground of the Soul" must be carefully maintained, as it can crack under the weight of unresolved tensions, societal fragmentation, or the exploitation of religious narratives for sectarian purposes. Thus, the "Ground of the Soul" is not an unshakable foundation, it is a delicate equilibrium, constantly shaped by human decisions, communal rituals, and sustained ethical commitments. Just as a strong foundation is necessary to support any structure, yet remains vulnerable to erosion, so too is collective volition indispensable to keeping the "Soul of Peace" alive, despite its inherent fragility.

2.3. The Soul of Peace, a Realisable Utopia

From a sociological perspective, the concept of the "Soul of Peace" integrates symbolic and spiritual elements with concrete social structures. Durkheim (1996) had already demonstrated that societies are held together by systems of beliefs, rituals, and practices that reinforce social cohesion. In this sense, the "Soul of Peace" is not a distant, unattainable dream, but a social force that emerges from the continuous practice of dialogue, cooperation, and reconciliation.

While the notion of utopia is often associated with idealism and impossibility, some theorists argue that utopias can be practical, providing a guiding vision for achievable transformation. Lederach (2005), in his discussion on peacebuilding in conflict contexts, emphasises that social change and conflict resolution are not the results of grand political agreements alone, but rather emerge from daily interactions and the strengthening of community networks. The "Soul of Peace" aligns with this perspective, presenting peace not as a fixed destination, but as an ongoing process sustained by individual and collective volition. In this sense, it resonates with the ideas of Paulo Freire (1997), who argues that hope and action must coexist in a true transformation that requires both a critical vision of reality and the agency to change it.

The lens of the Soul of Peace is not merely a philosophical proposition, it is already observable in concrete peacebuilding efforts. The work of Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR) in Lebanon illustrates how interfaith dialogue, reconciliation practices, and ethical commitments actively construct peace in divided societies. Similarly, grassroots initiatives worldwide, such as transitional justice programs, post-conflict education efforts, and community-based mediation, demonstrate that peace can be built from below, through sustained relational engagement.

However, this process is neither linear nor guaranteed. The Soul of Peace is fragile, it can be eroded by political polarisation, the instrumentalisation of religious identities, or the spread of extremist narratives. This reinforces the urgency of continuous ethical engagement and critical awareness, ensuring that peace remains a living force rather than an abstract aspiration. Therefore, this new concept, although complex and challenging, reflects a practical and achievable utopia, not an impossible ideal. Like the "soul", peace must be continuously nourished by concrete actions, ethical choices, and social interactions that foster cohesion and mutual understanding. The social construction of the "Soul of Peace" is not utopian in the sense of being unattainable, but rather a dynamic aspiration, one that requires continuous effort, ethical engagement, and collective commitment.

3. DLR and the Soul of Peace: Education in Lebanon's Silent Conflict

The connection between the perspective of the social construction of the "Soul of Peace" and non-formal education for peace lies in the way education serves as a social space where interactions shape the moral and collective "soul" of a community. In Lebanon, a fragmented society in a state of silent conflict, non-formal education emerges as an essential tool for fostering a culture of peace, mitigating radicalisation, and strengthening social cohesion. Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR) plays a key role in this process, providing an environment for interfaith dialogue and reconciliation, where peace is cultivated not merely as an absence of conflict, but as an ongoing social and spiritual construct.

In recent years, Lebanon has experienced overlapping economic, political, and social crises, creating a climate of uncertainty that does not necessarily manifest as direct violence, but deepens mistrust and division between religious and cultural communities. The fragmentation of Lebanese society, shaped by decades of conflict, continues to influence social interactions, reinforcing sectarian and ideological barriers.

Just as peace is a socially constructed force, so too is uncertainty. The prolonged nature of Lebanon's silent conflict has given rise to a persistent 'Soul of Uncertainty', a collective state of instability, mistrust, and fragility. Unlike visible war, silent conflicts manifest through economic crises, political deadlocks, and deep-rooted social divisions, creating an underlying fear that shapes daily interactions and long-term perceptions of security. This 'Soul of Uncertainty' weakens social cohesion, reinforcing sectarian divides and limiting the possibilities for reconciliation. It stands in contrast to the 'Soul of Peace',

which requires continuous renewal and ethical engagement to overcome the corrosive effects of instability

By focusing on non-formal education, DLR creates a safe space where young people from different religious and cultural backgrounds can engage in dialogue and cooperation, countering extremist narratives and fostering reconciliation.

According to this new perspective of the social construction of the "Soul of Peace", non-formal education is not just about knowledge transfer, it is a dynamic process where social interactions shape reality and the identity of a community. Thus, in the Lebanese context, non-formal education becomes a tool for rebuilding social ties, reinforcing coexistence through dialogue and collaboration. As Berger and Luckmann (2010) argue, social realities are shaped through everyday interactions. DLR, through its educational initiatives, facilitates the deconstruction of deep-rooted prejudices, creating an environment where young people actively shape a new social reality grounded in mutual understanding and peace.

Unlike formal education, which often operates within a bit more rigid institutional and curricular structures, non-formal education in Lebanon transcends traditional boundaries. It creates opportunities for young people to exercise their volition, developing the ability to intentionally choose peace over extremism and division. DLR provides spaces where these young people can meet, share experiences, and reconfigure their social identities, challenging and breaking narratives of hatred and exclusion. In Lebanon, where religion is deeply embedded in public and private life, the "Soul of Peace" can be understood as a force that unites individuals across religious and cultural divisions. By promoting non-formal education with a strong interfaith component, DLR functions as a mediator, facilitating the construction of this collective "soul" through shared symbols, rituals, and ethical dialogue.

The social construction of peace, therefore, is not simply about dialogue and cooperation, it involves a deeper, spiritual dimension that gives life to the community. In this sense, peace can be likened to an "animistic soul", not in the traditional religious sense, but as a collective force shaped by shared beliefs, moral imagination, and sustained interactions. Through DLR's engagement with young people and religious leaders, peace ceases to be merely the opposite of war, it becomes an intentional, spiritual, and relational commitment to coexistence.

Non-formal education, as practised by DLR, enables individuals to exercise their collective volition, reinforcing what I define as the "Ground of the Soul". This collective will is the foundation upon which the "Soul of Peace" is constructed and maintained. However, in a context of deep-seated social divisions, political instability, and sectarian narratives, this foundation is inherently fragile. The choice for peace is never automatic, it requires risk-taking, uncertainty, and a continuous effort to rebuild trust.

As Lederach (2005) highlights in his concept of the "mystery of risk", true transformation occurs only when individuals are willing to confront uncertainty and make difficult decisions for the sake of reconciliation. By fostering a space for non-formal education, DLR equips young people with the tools to navigate these uncertainties, enabling them to actively choose reconciliation over division.

Ultimately, Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR) plays a crucial role in the process of constructing the "Soul of Peace" in Lebanon. Through its non-formal educational initiatives, interfaith dialogue, and reconciliation efforts, DLR creates spaces where young people from different communities can engage, cooperate, and collectively reimagine social realities grounded in peace and mutual respect. These interactions are essential in cultivating a "Soul of Peace" that transcends historical and cultural divisions, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and harmonious Lebanese society.

In sum, non-formal education in Lebanon plays a critical role in constructing the "Ground of the Soul", a fragile yet essential foundation upon which peace can be built and sustained. Through DLR's initiatives, young people and religious leaders actively engage in shaping peace, exercising their volition, and fostering a collective, spiritual force that unites Lebanese society, even in the most challenging times.

Peace in Lebanon is not an abstract ideal, but a social and spiritual construction, a lived reality shaped by continuous commitment to dialogue, cooperation, and reconciliation. Non-formal education, facilitated by Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation, thus emerges as an indispensable tool for building the "Soul of Peace" and ensuring that Lebanese society can overcome its divisions and cultivate a sustainable, cohesive future.

Conclusion

The Soul of Peace emerges not as a static achievement, but as a fragile, living force—constantly shaped by human volition, ethical engagement, and the delicate balance between reconciliation and uncertainty. In a society marked by silent conflict, the

challenge is not merely to prevent war, but to resist the gradual erosion of trust, cohesion, and collective resilience.

If peace is a social and spiritual construction, then what happens when its foundation is left unattended? Can the Ground of the Soul withstand the weight of political instability, economic fragility, and sectarian narratives? Or will the Soul of Uncertainty deepen its hold, turning silent conflict into an irreversible condition? The modern world evolves faster than its institutions can adapt. As societies become increasingly fragmented, traditional structures of governance and social cohesion struggle to keep pace with the changing dynamics of volition and human interaction. If institutions cannot sustain the Soul of Peace, does its survival depend solely on the will of communities and individuals? Can peace truly be sustained when it is no longer supported by the structures that once upheld it?

This study does not claim to offer definitive answers, but it does open new questions: If the Soul of Peace is constantly at risk of erosion, what mechanisms, beyond institutions, can reinforce it? Can the collective will to peace persist in an age of uncertainty, or will it, too, become a fleeting aspiration? Perhaps the greatest threat to peace is not war itself, but forgetting that peace requires work. And perhaps, the Soul of Peace is not something we find, but something we must choose—again and again, before it fades into silence.

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APPENDICES

Researcher:

What are the main challenges you face as a religious leader in a community marked by conflict and cultural diversity?

Orthodox Priest:

Previously, some Orthodox religious leader's mindset, interfered in the jobs, ask people that feel negatively "why are you doing that? Why a waste of time? Social environment was impacting negatively. The social situation, not necessarily the financial one, but even intellectual one understanding dealing with each other's, education, cultural situation, cultural background. So, we try to give some hope, talk to people, support the situation and advise them.

Researcher:

How can religious differences be a source of division, but also an opportunity for peacebuilding?

Orthodox Priest:

Divisions is the reality of the ground. How? How many are we aware? How much are we aware culturally, academically, religiously with others, those who are following this religious group or that religion group. How they are aware? So, inside the religious community, there are sometimes many divisions inside the same group, or he considered that inside the same group they are what they are one, like him or like her. If they are different than him inside semigroups, and sometimes they would cause him an attempt, out of the group as careful. We must be split the divisions, because the divisions are the sources for wars and conflicts. But in the end, we rip in this world and within that world that there is a lot of interest for big, big countries, international forces that are abusing from this divisions between the people to execute their own agenda.

The door for education, for peace it's a possibility, but in a platonic way, because big countries that have interests in Lebanon, they want to find their opportunity in the country. Religious leaders, they can use other type of divisions, at least other type of diversity to create more divisions, more segregations to create more conflicts. If Lebanon was all orthodox, then some would be Orthodox Greek and some other Orthodox Arabs. They would find reason for divisions.

Researcher:

What is the biggest challenge you encounter when you want to work together with other religious leaders?

Orthodox Priest:

It depends on the different steps, different levels. At the beginning when we started eight years ago, to promote this idea, among others, the group and decided to be together, it was a hard challenge to build a project together. But fortunately, it was easy to be done. It was challenging at the beginning eight years ago. The second level, second challenge, this idea that was installed to keep and to promote it, to be faithful to its truth, to its foundation. When something big and became more known, more spreading, it may be misunderstood to towards certain group to certain persons misunderstood with some. Other challenges depend on the project. Sometimes because we have a series of long projects, we worked with university student and school student and NGOs. It depends. Every type of project, every level gets its own challenges. But no doubt that this challenge now is much easier than the challenges that I faced inside my own church is much less than before. But with other groups, other religious groups, lebanese religious group Sunnis, Alawites, maronites, it was the beginning. We had some challenges. Now I don't think that we have any challenges at this level. The challenge now is on Ziad's level on DLR, to bring more projects, more funds, financial support. In order to do more projects together to sustain the group, to be able to keep this network is a services network with the same charisma, with the same power, with the same, along with the same spread of. We can do together, we can meet together, as we have met one month ago to reflect on the topic, but it depends on the financial support.

Researcher:

What are the main social changes you've seen since taking part in *dlr* activities?

Orthodox Priest:

The Social challenges is that we cooperated together, to fix and to be able to address certain type of problems on a social level among us. So, we must work together.

Researcher:

What can you do to prevent religious extremism and build peace among young people?

Orthodox Priest:

I will go back to education and culture. We need to allow our young men and women to meet other inside the same religious group first and then to focus on what we are. Our

faith is encouraging and support and push toward respecting the other. The main head who would to protect that kind of operations that a government that is aware and supportive and putting facilities toward, that the government should work to facilitate allowing young men and women to mingle, to socialize, to do activities together.

Semi-structured interview with the Sunni Sheikh (transcribed)

Researcher:

What are the main challenges you face as a religious leader in a community marked by conflict and cultural diversity?

Sheik Sunni:

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the challenges, I mean, I can divide them into two parts, an internal and external challenge. In some minds, unfortunately, are still people that hesitate to build a dialogue and a real relationship with non-muslims. Protocol is limited to protocol relationships. In the long run, these will be dangerous, especially if it reaches a decision-making position. This is internally, in the wider environment. The externally challenges that there are some of those affiliated with religion, religiosity and science and they oppose, injure and defame such relationships with the absence of the state and the law. And power takes their glory, and they may cause harm for such relationships. That's it in a nutshell, now it's no longer.

Researcher:

How can religious differences be a source of division, but also an opportunity for peacebuilding?

Sheik Sunni:

We need to be linking something, lobbying for something. Seeking something by itself is not enough. We need to do a little bit more. We need to have a direction, guidelines, authorities within the with solid foundation, solid location that they can adopt and sponsor such kind of initiatives like what we are doing. Then we can shine more and give us some kind of legitimacy, then we can become part of our academic life, social life, religious life, institutional life. Otherwise, it will be less relations, friendship... And then we'll build something not sustainable if we don't build it on solid foundation, and we cannot do a lot if this just used for limiting our friendship. And this is hurting because the initiatives are very strong, very good, very solid, but if they cannot go, there is no sustainability, and that's not good.

Researcher:

What is the biggest challenge you encounter when you want to work together with other religious leaders?

Sheik Sunni:

Our work together as religious leaders, if one of us don't understand what we're doing, it may be hurting. If someone went with us, joined us, and stays in a deadlock, he cannot find himself. They are not in line with our open-minded spirit. Our work together in this diversity, I am not exaggerating if I say, that we become one. Because each one it can replace the other and this happened also on many occasions. I can talk on behalf of the orthodox father, the other sheiks... We are one because we became cemented together. So, everyone can talk on one of each other we can replace. The idea is to believe and to build a beautiful synchronization.

Researcher:

What are the main social changes you've seen since taking part in *dlr* activities?

Sheik Sunni:

And that something bothering, it's not more than challenge. It's something bothering, not challenges. If social life financially allows, we could go and be much more together. But the financial situation is in decapping us. We have lost some and the persons here and there we cannot due to the challenges, social financial challenges that we are facing. Because if we had the support financial support, we could do much, much, much more, but the lack of financial support is and decapping us and does not allowing us to be able to do more. I have been with other religious leaders, and I have been invited to many, many, many events in five stars hotels, with big budget, big ceremonies, red carpet. But it finished immediately at the same place. It was a lot of protocols, but nothing sustainable as we are doing since 8 years ago. The budget of one event like this, could give us money to do our activities for one year.

Researcher:

What can you do to prevent religious extremism and build peace among young people?

Sheik Sunni:

Well, we can do one thing, put all the politicians in the jail. This is what we can do to have peace, because these are the reasons of terrorism and extremism. Politicians no more. I

am very honest. They are sponsoring all corruption and even religious corruption. Then sometimes, religious leaders who are reading the sermons, they call for extremism, they let the religious leaders talk whatever they want. They don't stop them, but if they don't stop, the believers will believe in what they are saying. I said in the sermon last Friday, that I would prefer if we can put all the politicians in jail and finish this category. And the head of the police secret that was playing there, he said in front of him, that we'll move the Sheikh.

[Semi-structured interview with the Alawite Sheikh \(transcribed\)](#)

Researcher:

What are the main challenges you face as a religious leader in a community marked by conflict and cultural diversity?

Sheik Alawite:

Our journey together since eight years at DLR, put religious leaders together and it put us in a lot of challenges together, that we have faced and we're going to face again. Among the challenges, to be different from any other person who sometimes even at the site the same home, in same society, it could create these kinds of incidents in certain circumstances, especially in Tripoli, because it has a special character. It faced many problems, difficulties and problems challenges. Many of the challenges that we have faced, it's marked by its kind of extremism or radicalism. We are as a mission, as a as persons and head or his leaders to reveal the reality, the truth of the city. This is our face. Among the challenges that we have faced together, in the beginning we have faced some difficulties at the beginning of our journey. In Lebanon, the human beings are the enemies of what they ignore. We didn't know each other's well, not fully in some details we didn't where we were not aware about. Now this this type of differences we have been removed. Now, our communication together, we were able to live what others are not allowed to live together without or within our differences. We're able to celebrate our understanding. This is normal, is normal to be different, normal, to be different from each other, but is a normal to be ignored from each other. We're growing. We know that we're whatever we do, we'll continue to face diverse challenges because some concepts, some theories, some practices, some persons would be not understand or not help us to understand, to be closer. We're going to continue in this direction.

Researcher:

How can religious differences be a source of division, but also an opportunity for peacebuilding?

Sheik Alawite:

The second part is related to our job as religious leaders to unite to peacebuilding. This is our conception, this our faith, our belief. We know that we are different, this is normal. Nobody is totally identic even inside the same group, same religion, same faith, same group, nobody. There's no full matching. But the society that we're living in, we cannot get out of this context that we have lived since hundreds of years or thousands of years. I t's not easy to get out of this space understanding it has to be long term project from religious leaders to really understand the text, to register the text and to really the text and to get it out of this the box of some old mentalities. We need an academic way to enlightened speech and to counteract radicalism and conflicts. The generation of today, we cannot live today as a people 700 years ago or 100 years ago. Unfortunately, we lived much time as our fathers. Now we are in another environment. Our grandfathers are different from our context today. The pillars are the same, the foundation is the same, but the practices could be different. This is what we were able to do, to move forward. Unfortunately, some words are stuck in their mindset. We were not always able to move them and to progress. This is our mission. We think we have to continue it and to leave it.

Researcher:

What is the biggest challenge you encounter when you want to work together with other religious leaders?

Sheik Alawite:

The main importance thing for me is sustainability. We already did it since eight years ago. Even when we started in 2016, we know each other's for a long journey. That's why we are reunited in the spirit of we are similar to each other, in terms of thinking approach, open mindset. We have found difficulties somewhere, people that were not similar with us, left and run away. We have faced certain difficulties with certain type of persons and we try to avoid them. We need a very wise way, a decent way to work together and respect our differences. We have difficulties in Tripoli, inside Muslims itself, between muslims sunnis and muslim alawids. We have faced some difficulties at this level also. It's still some part of it, some traces, some remaining very small, remaining part but it is visible till now. We cannot remove it before making spreading the voice to limit the intervention of politicians and spreading hate among our two communities.

Researcher:

What are the main social changes you've seen since taking part in *dlr* activities?

Sheik Alawite:

Sometimes social difficulties. Those who are not aware about togetherness, the importance that were similar 80% similar to each other's, it's not easy to change them, it's not easy to modify their mindset, it's not easy to understand what you're doing. They can ask what is connecting you to the Sunnis or Orthodox or Catholic or Protestant. What is connecting you to each others? You're wasting your time. Because this is a ground work, and there's long time ago, the misperceptions have led to this type of incomplete or wrong questions to be raised that way. These old stereotypes misunderstanding that were inherited since long time ago. Because I started from a very long mindset, very long that politics have 80% influenced negatively on that.

Researcher:

What can you do to prevent religious extremism and build peace among young people?

Sheik Alawite:

I guess that the religious extremism today it's a waste of time, especially among the tools that some are using, especially with the society that is very limited in resources, the poor society that is restricted in the resources. If the site is able to counteract overcome the social, economic, financial situation challenges, then we can erase radicalism. Because we live this weird time, we know that we have rich people that do not have the same financial challenges, they are away, away, away, away from religious extremism. So, they are using people with limited resources, with naive mindset, they use them or abuse of them to destroy the societies, to destroy their situation. Our mission is to overcome and to stop this type of ideologies and radicalization.

[Semi-structured interview with the Director and Founder of DLR \(transcribed\)](#)

Researcher:

What are the warning signs when a young people start to feel attracted to extremist propaganda?

Director and Founder of DLR:

The warning signs are high is yet for head, though the warning sign for extremism, I would say people as young men and women will start being isolating themselves and not caring a lot and getting to different social media platforms that are promoting propaganda radicalism, etc. So, they start isolating themselves and reading and hearing, reading. Hearing we're watching these types of things, and this I get among the among the signs I would say certain type of discussions where they will start to be criticizing severely the moderate persons or moderate groups and trying to say to justify left wing, extreme, extreme left wing or extreme right wing. I guess this all the among the signs that I may consider in the important to take care about.

Researcher:

What are the main strategies that DLR uses to prevent religious extremism and build peace among young people?

Director and Founder of DLR:

There is different strategies, but I think our person, I do believe in what we the strategies that I would recommend that are the strategies that would connect them to peace builders, people, people who are able to cross the bridge to overcome difficulties, to overcome challenges, to overcome radicalism, to overcome hate speech, etc. So, the more we connect them to people that they were able to do that, the better it is I guess because these people are true speakers are true testimony. Through like they did it in their lives, not in their publications, not in their books, not in their sermons, not in their talks, not in their confidences. But mainly they did it through their own life. So, the more we connect people, young men and women, to read bridge with the deal. Trauma healers here, people who are able to overcome radicalism, then there would be, I guess a we we may have better but good result.

Researcher:

What was the biggest challenge in deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes among religious leaders? And in young people?

Director and Founder of DLR:

About young people, the difficulty is the main changing because the I would say that the social media today that some political some are use or extremism are using promoting and abusing of social media platforms to promote the propaganda. So sometimes you

feel that you are combating, or you have a battle with a huge infrastructure of groups, so you promote something and then the night the same night, TikTok will invade them with hundreds of videos that could, probably or Instagram that could probably spread the hate speech theories. So, it's a kind of a permanent battle where you have to continue because if we stop doing this, promoting this speech, these speeches and open and openness, mind, spirit and police builder, they may be attracted by his radicalism through like. This is among the youths.

Among the religious leaders, I would say that they need more and more opportunities to meet with each others and to connect with each others and to be able to work together. These through working together, they can overcome.

Researcher:

Could you share some concrete examples of the positive impact your organization has had on the local community in terms of peacebuilding and preventing extremism?

Director and Founder of DLR:

Evolution of people, people that pass by DLR and get wings and flew. I have a lot of examples... So good people grow up in this NGO, without great funds, and now they are leading other NGO or institutions. Some give up their job, a case of one engineer, to built peace among people, not just houses or buildings. Cases like this one, are the positive impact of DLR.

[Focus group with the tutors of the Emotional and Educational Support \(transcribed\)](#)

Researcher:

How do you see the relationship between religious and cultural diversity and the occurrence of conflicts or extremism in a society? If you can see a link between the religious diversity and the rising of the extremism and conflict.

Tutor A:

So Lebanon is known as the melting pot of different religions. But the matter of the fact is that when someone tells you their family name, you immediately know where they're from and and what their religion is.

Sometimes when you meet someone when the more you know, people who are more into their religion like. We don't typically stay. We don't typically we claim that we are very (you know) integrated and very loving but then something happens and we are very quick to blame each other. So when something happens in the news or something we are very

quick to blame and we are very quick to separate like it's them not us, it's us, not them. So this would be, yeah, this would be my answer.

Tutor B:

Lebanon, we have a very huge diversity and everything and food and and people's colours and knowledge and idea. So even especially in religious. So, we have like 12 I guess, 17 (religions) in Lebanon. So is it a conflict sometimes yes as you said.

Even, especially in their old and many others, NGOs, we're working on break it, to break the ice between us and them like we know and so on, I can say that when I am a Christian or a Muslim. And when I am working with the kids that is Muslim or Christian even it's on zoom, I am inside his home. I can listen his parent talking. I can see her sister playing. So, it's like they are inviting me to come inside to his home. So here I know I can breathe, and I can break it. And to keep the depolarization, I must work on the minor, the children because if I work with someone that is. Not only order focusing on his goal and is not able to listen to me, I cannot get any results in the future.

Tutor A:

Because the kids are blank slates now, they don't have this, this prejudice or this thing built into them. So what Tutor B is saying, is that, when we're working with the kids, (we know that) they are the future, because they are still open, they have an open mind. We can break the ice easier that way. They can have a good example of what the other is.

Researcher:

So the goal is a kind of to work in these new generations because there is hope in these newer generations.

Tutor C:

I have another experience. Sorry, I am a french educated, so I will try to speak in English.

First, I have two experiences because first I don't have a problem about the religious problem in Lebanon, but I have about the cultural differences and diversity because I am a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon. So I will talk more about when I was a student and because I am a teacher now in a school. When I was a student, I have many of scholarship, but I can't take it because I am Palestinian. It's from the it's you know; you feel about the discrimination. It's important point. But today I have a story, I will share for you. I put the Palestinian idea.

Supervisor - “if you can take out (the pin Palestinian flag in the shirt), because I don’t want any political association in the school (about Palestine);

Tutor C - It’s not political, it’s my country.

Supervisor - So, I don’t put the flag of the Palestinian party. You should take it out.

Tutor C - So, I will sign my resignation.

Supervisor – Ok ok!

Tutor A:

That's so interesting. You know, they thought the first instinct was it's political party.

Tutor C:

This is not a political, it’s about the difference between the culture. Not the relation, but the culture. Many of experience here it’s about it.

Researcher:

Thank you for sharing. Next question is: What are the main challenges you face in trying to build peace in actual Lebanon context (conflict in the south, political instability, economic crisis, refugee crisis)?

TutorA:

In my opinion, all the things you're naming, are very quick fix, a very simple fix. It's something that we can, you know, overstep very easily. The bigger issue in my opinion, is the mentality. So, you know, crisis can bring people together. Solidarity.

Crisis in the Jnub happened here. I'm gonna tell you a little story. I heard about it when the war started in their home, everyone was fleeing their homes and they were trying to, you know, get a home, a temporary home here in our area in the district.

(My friend and Tutor B’s brother come in. I don't know if he faced the same thing.) My friend works in real estate and he was being bombarded with calls about people who want to, you know, rent homes and they were saying, you know, we want to rent the home, but we're not gonna move in now. We're gonna keep it as a safe space. We're gonna pay upfront. We can pay for a whole year upfront, but please save us a home so that if something goes on and you know we need somewhere to flee. And my friend, he's very, you know, supportive he he ran, he went to everyone. He knows all the homes he. The

second that the homeowners heard that they were people fleeing from the Snoop and coming all of a sudden they don't want to earn their homes anymore. They don't care about the money, even though the people have the money to pay. They're telling them I will pay you upfront. They were like, no, we have maximum capacity of four people in the House. They cannot come a whole family. All of a sudden or no, I cannot rented to them, and here the crisis is not the issue. The money is not the issue. The war is not the issue. Outside parties are not the issue. The issue is actually in the people in the humans that are living closed mind. It was a very big struggle because the my friend who was trying to build this bridge, he was trying to protect those people who didn't know where their life is going, who were about to lose everything they have, who are unstable, he was doing the most of his ability. But people were standing in his way. People who are supposed to feel for those, for those people who have nothing to lose because you're getting paid, you're getting the money you're asking for. What's the difference if you? If you rent it to someone that's from here or from there so. In my opinion this is the biggest challenge!

Tutor B:

It's like Tutor A said. Also it's the Lebanese challenge! I know we're getting better, but it's not enough. We need the more volunteer, we need, the more youth. But the problem is even the youth are going out of Lebanon, so we're running out. We are running out of youth, open mind people, people who are willing to work for forward to change so.

Researcher:

And those, that usually stay, have less qualifications. So the pressure is very different...

Tutor B:

Yes...

Tutor C:

You know the personal refugee in Lebanon, they don't have the right to work or study in the public school, in, in, in general. OK, so you know, the schools are specific for the Palestinian. It's owner was school. You know the it's the UN, but it is a school specific for the Palestinian refugees, so. The experience is just to make a siege about the Palestinian to and isolate him to. And it's not to integrate with the Lebanese society and you know, the civil war in Lebanon. So now in in my university, I started to be a knome (nómada).

So all my friends and colleagues in the universities had or he is Palestinian, so we are Christians, so and the civil war between the Palestinian and the Christian. And but If you

enter of the camps in Lebanon, the Civil War, it's not, remember it. It's forget it all. No one remember the civil war and don't it's not a discuss between the refugees. This is an important point.

Researcher:

The school program tried to hide that?

Tutor A:

No. The refugee itself, the Palestinian refugee, they don't discuss. They overcame it, but here the generations they're passing it through like the kids that are your age. They didn't passed through. The world they had nothing to do with it, but they hear from their parents, from their grandparents. You know, we fought war with them. Oh, my God, they're mad. They're good. They won. They lost.

Tutor C:

And and you know the the fund of UNRWA, it's to change the academic curriculum or the refugee, because money of countries freezing the fund of their donations to make a new plan, the map of Palestine, the new map of it's a challenge. It's more challenge to preserve your identity. You are as a Palestinian.

Researcher:

Thank you!

What are the warning signs that you have the tutors should be aware to identify young people at risk of radicalization or involvement in extremism activities?

I don't know if it is visible in your intervention...

Tutor A:

Yes, there is many. Signs OK, so I have a story about that soon warning signs.

So the first year we started, I think you're going to know the story and I think you have a different perspective from my perspective. So, the first year we started the tutoring we had three kids, young kids, they were actually Syrian refugees. And we were teaching them, and I was teaching all three of them. The youngest was four years old and the eldest was nine. I believe, and I was teaching them English. And when they came into my sessions, they were so excited they were participating, they would wait for me. They

would text me. They would always, you know, when Ramadan was here. They would discuss it with me. Tell me now we're going to start and all these things.

And then we had our, our three months meeting that we do online to discuss everything that we've been through, I hear DLR Director telling us that he's hearing many complaints from different tutors, that they are struggling with this with this family, that the family isn't cooperating with them, that the that the mother is always asking them to give them more sessions. They were facing many issues. Do you remember? I was shocked when I heard and I called DLR Director after the meeting. Like I was. Like what? What are you talking about? Well, what do you mean? I never, never faced anything. They are so grateful when I teach them, they never ask me for anything extra. And when they do, they are very grateful. They are very thankful. They always show up on time. They always have their books and their little pens and they start to sit together with the sessions although. When their youngest sister is studying, they all sit with their joy to help her. He told me that some other tutors that are teaching this family are seeing struggle. So I started to think to myself what was I doing differently than those tutors? Why are those tutors struggling to reach this this family but not me? And after, you know, I didn't meet the tutors. I don't know their names. I don't know who they are, but this relation I got at the end. So, they were showing me their differences and I was showing them my differences, but we were meeting together on our differences. They would share their lives with me and I would share my life with them and I would accept them just as they are. So I was open and understanding that these kids and their parents have lost everything they have and they moved to Lebanon, and I am here giving them some hope. I'm not here just to teach them. At the end of the day, it is emotional support before it is educational support. So unfortunately, we do not teach this family anymore. I still have their numbers. I still speak to them from time to time. And here is where the negative beats the positive.

Researcher:

So, the key is to build a kind of confidence, trustiness, and then you get the part of educational field...?

Tutor A:

Exactly. You do what you have to do and then everything will fall in its place.

Tutor B:

OK. I will talk about an experience that I love, but it's not in the DLR. It's a Lebanese NGO that I used to go for camps when I was younger. The camps were. They bring the like people from Ashrafi, let's say, and people that are in conflict with Ashrafi like Jnoub, I don't know. So was I when I was younger, I was in love with this NGO, and the night before we are going to bed and to sleep, we have a retrial that we do a circle Muslims Christian and everyone say a prayer a prayer and in the way he want we can pray, like a Christian and I, I can only take thank you God for today because it was an amazing day and day after day I memorized, I memorized the Muslim prayer. And for now I still memorize it and I say it so sometimes I am with friends and I say it's the first as I had. Like what? How do you know? They know I am Christian and I am very a religious person. I go to church and I pray why you are saying it I and tell them it's it's a prayer at the end, so it's fine and uh don't have that stereotype. Don't put that stereotype on people on prayers because the prayer is something that you are talking to God. Whatever. What God you believe. Yes, and like from two days ago, I say the fact, and I were like.

And kids? Yes, especially in the first days of prayer and of rejoice. Like everyone is like, what are you saying? What are he talking about? What is this prayer? I don't know. It. And and in the end of the camp, everyone is saying every prayer. So that's amazing when you see. In the first you can see in their face because children don't know how to hide. They, their expressions, and so when you talk about another religion in front of children, you can see directly through their free face. Uh. If they are used to it or not.

Tutor C:

I don't teach any any student about radicalization, but I can talk more about the if you specific more be specific about the Palestinian camp in Lebanon. The religion it's not the main step for the Palestinian refugees. So, for example, 3 leaders for PLO. If we talk about Omar is Sunni, Habash is Christian... But now the Islamic Movement it's increasing, but refugees don't be a member in this movement because it is Islamic Movement, because it's just for the resistance. About the students, I didn't teach anyone that have extremists. Yeah, but there is awareness session and many of NGO's in the camps make awareness session training.

Researcher:

But outside the box, do you feel that there is a kind of rising of extremism because there is social discontentment?

Tutor A:

With the kids?

Researcher:

In general.

Tutor A:

It's just, it's just there, you know, I told you, crisis brings people together, but then they start to. It's just it's a cycle. It's a cycle. It it goes up and down, up and down. It never goes away. But when it reaches an all time high this is where is the war. So yes, I was saying, you know, it goes up and down, but when it reaches an all time high is where a civil war happens. And then after the civil war, everything goes back to flowers and butterflies. And then everything is still again. And then it goes up. And then it says cycle. If you go back to the history of Lebanon every few years, same issue.

Tutor C:

You can't find the extremist with the it's not the in the public school in the some school of had a specific ideology.

Researcher:

Yes, I know, because the extremism is not just about the kind of the Islamic idea, because in Ashrafi there is the Soldiers of God... Christian radical movement.

Tutor A:

Yes. So yes, we have schools like a Christian School, a Muslim school, but then you have public schools, you have private schools, we have it all, and we're just living with it.

Tutor B:

But even in the Christian School, like I will say, fresh. Amazing. It's a Christian School, but most of the students are Muslims.

Tutor A:

Yes, it's like weird. It's so weird.

Tutor C:

But some schools specific in the in the suburbs, it's mainly in the same contacts, same ideology, same.

Tutor A:

Because also, the Lebanon is divided into areas like I'm not talking about Beirut. Beirut is mostly, you know, mixed. But when you go to Kaiser, where I'm from, you know, this city or this place is mostly Christian. So the school that's located in this place has mostly Christian students, but neighborhood in the place right next to it, it's mostly Shia. So, they're the school there has mostly Shia students.

Researcher:

What resources or tools can educational and psychosocial support tutors use to help young people deal with traumas related to cultural and religious conflicts and tensions?

Tutor A:

We actually did a training session on that. You remember Doctor Leila? I think her name was. We when we first started, we did a training session through the DLR, where licensed psychologists spoke to all the tutors about how to not get emotionally attached to those students, how to help them actually emotionally. How to understand that one day you won't be teaching them so you can't have them get attached?

You have to support them, understand them and the tools you could use the ways you could speak to them, which includes, you know, storytelling, daily discussions, daily updates, like how was your day today. And you know when we have, let's say, Easter, we speak to them about our Easter, and they have the Ramadan, they tell us about the about their experience just to be more open, but obviously with boundaries because you cannot force your stories or your religion upon the other person. If they are open to discuss them, you can go step by step into it. Start with the you know, small discussions. Where do you live? Where? What's your name? You know, these are things that you can tell where a person's background is and then step by step because you see those students every week, you get a more in depth look into their lives. Like, what's your mom cooking today? Oh, she's not cooking. Why not? Ohh, you're gonna eat at night. Why do you eat at night?

Tutor B:

OK, to deal with traumas as well, we can help the student, but we cannot fix the traumas. We're not even though I am. Because the tutors that are helping us are not specialists. So, we told them every time you have a big problem, please come and tell us, even in the emotional support we are listener more than and we are speakers.

Tutor A:

Because the kids have gone through very big traumas. That's why we started. The Beirut blast was a huge trauma for the kids. I remember one of the students, he lost a very big part of his family members, so throughout the sessions he would feel comfortable telling us about his experience, where he was at the time, what happened, what his sister told him, the car, everything, every session we would have, he wouldn't. He would try to deviate from studying by telling me stories about what he went through and what he's struggling right now, so storytelling for kids. I think Tutor B is going to speak more about the subject is the key to go through their traumas, but as she said, we are not specialized in helping them. We cannot give them advice because we have such a small part of their lives. We just see them from the phone. We don't know what is really going on. So just having someone to listen to them, having someone who isn't affected by the thing they got affected by. So, for me, thank God I wasn't affected by the Beirut Blast because I'm far away. So, when they were telling me about it, I didn't have this prejudice of this trauma that I don't want to hear about it. So, when someone would start to speak about the Beirut blast with me, I had a blank, a blank slate because I was able to listen to them because I did not share this trauma with them. Because imagine someone I had lost someone during the Beirut blast in my home, and then a kid is trying to tell me about their experience, I would tell them I went through it as well, like I can't. I can't hear you speaking about it because I was affected by it. So, this was the good part where we had people from all over the place helping kids from all over the place, because that way we were able to help them.

Tutor B:

And if I want to talk more about the Beirut blast, I remember personally I was in the other house, but without my uncles, I was with my young cousins. So, the youngest cousin was in the kitchen, she put herself under the table and there I told her to get down. She didn't understand what I said. Even I didn't understand. I didn't know how I react, so I took her, and I put her down and I was covering her to protect. So, then the aluminum door broke and continue into my back. So, then there was like freezing. What is happening? I was afraid. Please help me. I was young. I didn't know what to do with three kids at home. And I called the to my uncle. He was taking someone to the hospital, and I was alone with their kids. I didn't know anything about my mom. About my mother, about my sister, my brother. My sister is not in Lebanon.

So, when I teach the kids with DLR and the kids told me "I was like that (during the blast)", yes, I know what you're feeling, I experience it. But Tutor A said, you cannot give

them advice, we can listen, listen. If there is something huge, we can call the school saying that these kids need specially support.

Tutor C:

You can help them to adding some ideas in the chapters specifically. The history about the civilizations to open to other, and to know the other specific in this, when the student in the same class, so you can open the discussion about their own civilization, their own culture, and not to talk about the French civilization.

Researcher:

What kind of strategies do you think are most effective to involve and mobilise communities affected by the conflict and reducing extremist discourse among young people?

Tutor A:

You know what? I'm going to give you an example that was spoken in front of me yesterday. It has nothing to do with religious things, but the guys at my work, they were discussing basketball. So, actually, even in basketball we are separated because there is Basketball team is more towards Beirut, and then there's Hecla, which is more towards Kaiser. So everyone from Kaiser, they support the team until death. We still defend our teams still. I don't play basketball. I don't know the rules. I don't know anything, but if anyone asks me. So, they were talking about that yesterday. They were like, they're like, oh, too bad. You're with Riyadh, man, you're so cool. But you're with Riyadh, and then they were discussing that soon. There was the Asian basketball international tournament, and we support Lebanon (all together as a country). We don't play as so but it's the real the team playing because they won the tournament in Lebanon. So, he was telling him, I think they were playing against Iran. So, he was like what you know now when they're playing against another country, of course I support Riyadh. So here, here comes the fact where you can always find a common ground. You know, like if it were in religion and culture and society, when you find a common ground, when you find a common, I don't want to say it, but when you find a common enemy, they come together.

Researcher:

I understand. Huntington has a quote that supports your idea. He said that: “we just know who we are, when we know who we are not, and most of the time, we just know who we are, when we know who we are against.”

Tutor A:

So, it's the same, but we could change this context, and we could apply it in Lebanon with the youth, let's say with the camps, with the, you know, soccer teams with the activities for kids where they are forced, in quotation, to work together to beat the goal. So, actually in the training program we went to in Barcelona, they we spoke also about soccer tournaments in Lebanon. They all would plan soccer tournaments, but the teams would be together. They would be, they would be together. So, you know, soccer is based on teamwork. You cannot win if you're if you're not working as a team. So, you forget your identity. You forgot, you forget your name, your culture, your religion. You're just focusing on the ball and the goal and you are willing to talk to anyone just to be like you're not running and looking at this person? No, he's Muslim. I'm not. I'm not gonna give him the ball. No, I'm gonna give it to him because he's gonna reach the goal with me. He's gonna. So. So this, in my opinion would be a great strategy to apply.

Tutor B:

I will tell a story like Joanna about when we went to Tunis, we went me and Joanna to Tunis, and we learn about the polarization and what we can do here. So as well Joanna is in scouts, as well I am too. So, we get some kids from scouts, muslims and christians and we'll let them play together.

Tutor A:

Because even in scouts, we have Muslim scouts and Christian scouts and the Armenian scouts and other countries. They just have Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts.

Tutor B:

As well, I am responsible of a movement, which is a NGO for Brothers Schools (religious congregation), that promote summer camps. So, you can see schools of Lebanon in one place. So, when we are together in this camp, I can see the diversity and I can see how much we are different. But as a garden, full of flowers. Because, if a garden has no flower, it has no meanings, so when we put in a team, you know in a good team, you need a leader and you need someone that cannot play the leader, and you need someone that is a

recognize leader. So, when you put them together in one team, they are doing so much good job. It's better than to put all the leaders together and all the characteristic, the different characteristic.

Tutor C:

I will share you to experience about the strategies of one about. Each camp, in the outside of camp, they have checkpoint for the Lebanese Forces (Army). We prepare a play with the police and the refugees, because the Palestinian said: “why the checkpoint? Because I'm Palestinian? So, I will fight with the forces”. So, when you play a football, the discrimination from the police against the refugees, it's decrease and the point of view of the refugee about the police, it's in the next change.

Second one, I have a friend in Ain al-Hilweh, it's a biggest camp. It's not a civilian camp, so, when he entered to the camp, he go to the checkpoint and the checkpoint. It's very hard, they take out the shoes to get in... it's an army refugee camp. My friend has small kids, so, he said ok in the checkpoint. The police said: “don't be scared (to the kids), I will clean your shoes”. So, one time these kids entered to the camp and said to their father: “Dad, dad, he doesn't take to clean my shoes”; He said: “you are a VIP – Very Important Palestinian”.

Researcher:

Three more questions... you can handle? - Do you believe that religion and education can play an important role for peacebuilding for the next generations in the actual context?

Tutor A:

Education is everything. Education is everything, everything, everything. I would speak about my education. I attended a school where it's an International School where religion is nowhere to be seen, because it's a secular school with people from all around the world. Many religions. But we were we were advised. It's not that we were not allowed, but we were advised to, you know, hide the cross, keep it to yourself. The hijab you can wear it but keep it to yourself. You know everything was meant to be kept for yourself, but it was very open. So, because we had people from different religions, people from all over the world, I was subjected to dialogue for with their people from all around the world, and many, many different religions. So, our curriculum included stories from different different places and lessons from different countries. So, it was so interesting that at school we would learn about those different cultures, whether it be Egypt or the United States or Rome or anything ancient civilizations. How we got here. It was very interesting

to learn about it, and it was also very interesting to suddenly discover that the friends you've been playing with, who's been coming to your house, and you're to their house. "Ohh they're actually Muslims". So, what happened with me? It was like my first experience with such a thing. I had a friend; I blame myself because her name is a Muslim name. But I was a child, and I did not know that we had Muslim names and Christian names. I just knew that we had names so, she would come over to my house and I went over to her house for the first time, and I had to use the bathroom. So, I went in and her mom came in before me into the bathroom and she got me a like some kind of water bucket like the the one where you sprayed the flowers with. I didn't really give or take like anything else. Like, maybe because the toilet doesn't flush or maybe she just keeps there. Because, well, I didn't know. I didn't know any better. So, you know, I did my business. I flushed all the toilet flushes. OK, great. I left. I didn't do anything about it. Then I went home, and I grew up and she still came over to my house. I still went to her house. I had no idea what this bucket was in the bathroom and no, because I didn't know that. This was something different. I just thought that this was something extra, that they had. Maybe it's for the smell, I don't know.

So, after I graduated school, I was in the car with my mom, and I told her. She was talking about; I was standing here. Now, my friend, she's Christian and she's marrying someone that's Muslim and I'm invited to the wedding. She was like, yeah. You know, your friends, the parents. You know, one of them is Shia and other is Sunni. Really? They're Muslims?

like it's not that I I didn't know that they're her parents were different. I didn't know that they were Muslims Muslim. I didn't know that they that they were. I didn't know if they were Christians or Muslims. I had no idea what they were. And at the time I knew that I learned that Muslims used their bucket. So, though I think it's to wipe like instead of wiping, they use water because they believe it's cleaner, so it instantly clicked in my head, so "that's why they brought me the bucket in the bathroom". Yes, because it was, it was so weird to me. It was something that I did not have the answer to.

So, education here to go back to the point, education gives you a bigger mind, an open mind and understanding of the world and an understanding of others to look at the person as a human first, and then to be open to understanding their backgrounds. It also exposes you to different contacts to different people, to different cultures and you know, I would definitely put my kids in a secular school and Religion would be something at home. We would grow up with religion at home, but at school go there, be exposed, learn and be open minded and choose whichever way you want to go.

Researcher:

So, do you believe it is better to separate politics from religion? Religion out of school? I know they can complement itself but...

Tutor A:

Religion has nothing to do with schools, in my opinion. Do you do you believe that the Lebanon is struggling because of this thing? Because there's a school that's a Christian. OK, but they accept everyone. But before the day starts, they shuffle the kids into church and they make them pray, and then each one goes to their class. But how are you open to all those students if you're gonna force them to go? What the Muslim kids say? They sit and wait outside. Religion has nothing to do with kids. Religion is something to be to be based at home, but it's not that we must shut it off completely. We must educate about it, but not about one specific. You are claiming to live in a cultural melting pot and a religious melting pot. Schools must be a representation of society. You must treat everyone equally and just be open, open to everyone. Don't force anything upon anyone, and if you're not able to do so, then cancel it out.

Tutor B:

I think, it's like a pyramid, so I guess here are the base, and here (base) is the education and their religion. And everything here can go to the family, social life, community, everything. So why is the base and not the the top? Because if the base it's at the top, the base will fall. The base is religion and education, I think it's complemented. So, because religion is many a kind of rules to tell people how to be a great person, the greatest version of them and how to evaluate the way to be. Everything about religion is directed at the vision about the heart, everything about emotions, the emotions of people in general.

Tutor A:

What she's saying is that, it's good, but it's not being sent out properly. So, the way we are teaching religion in schools now is not the proper way to do it. So, if we fix it, then it will build a stronger pyramid.

Tutor C:

I'm between the two points of views. I am in the middle, so I am not against to learn the religion in the in the school, but I am not with also. So how you can learn the religions as you can learn all the religions, to know the others, but not just for the Muslim or Christian or, you know, budism, anyone, any, any religions to know the others and you can choose

the student you can choose because no one was chose his religion, and this is the point of view or my point of view, in the education.

Researcher:

Bourdieu talks about the hidden curriculum. It's an idea that behind the official curriculum (teaching the letters, signs, subjects...), there is a body language, the structure of the room class, that can give you a hidden message, indirect, mostly. When I was in the North of Lebanon, Akkar region, I saw that there were differences between how teachers teach the Syrians and teach the lebanese. But when they were together, they were just saying that the syrians are a bad example, so you need to follow the lebanese example. In this way, it will continue this kind of cycle, so you are not giving the real curriculum to study, but indirectly, it will pass a hidden message that can extend the prejudice and stereotypes in education too. So, it's necessary a quality education.

Tutor A:

I have a story about my brother because you mentioned the syrian students and the lebanese students, and in our like house in the mountains. So, you have a house in the mountains in this village, there is a school, it's a public school. During the day they teach the lebanese students, and in the afternoon, they teach the Syrian students. And this school has basketball court, where we can go play sometimes, but if the students are studying or the lebanese students are studying, we cannot play in the court. But my brother wanted to play basketball, and we told him he couldn't because the syrians were studying. He was weirded out because, like, why are they studying? It's like 6 p.m. at night. I was not expecting his question, and I didn't know how to answer him. But my quick thinking saved me. I didn't want to tell him that we separate them, because we don't want them to learn and the same time, so I had the plan. I told him that because the Syrian kids, there's war in their country, they weren't able to go to school. So. So they were a little behind with their work. So, if we put them with the Lebanese students who were just studying normally, they would be behind their classes, their colleagues would be getting high grades, and they would be struggling so it wouldn't be fair. So that's why we tried to make it fair for them. That's why they have now teachers that teach them at their own pace so that they can catch up to the things that they lost. I knew that, what I told them really stuck into his mind, because the next morning on his way to school, he told my mom what I had told him and my mom had quick thinking and she agreed with me and she told him that hopefully, hopefully their country gets better and then when they go back to their country, they're able to continue their education and rebuild their

country. So here we didn't build the prejudice with my brother. My brother was 10 or 9 at the time, when I told him this, so if I were to tell a nine-year-old that yes, we don't want them to be in in the same class as the Lebanese students because they're not like us. Why would we teach them like we teach our normal students? What the people would say, he would build this, this knowledge that he has Syrians. They're dumb. And I say that in quotation. They're dumb. They don't know. So, we don't want them with us, they're whatever. So, you know, I tried my best to build this positive prejudice of we have equal opportunities, and we want to help everyone in the way that suits them.

Researcher:

What I felt in Akkar region, I felt that teachers were very, very, very tired because they had to handle the refugee students and Lebanese students in a very poor area. But at the same time, I felt that the qualifications of the teachers were built in a lot of prejudice, because you cannot put yourself out of a long story that gave you a lot of suffering. And remember that and it was so weird, when I saw the teachers teaching with a stick in their hand, as a treat to bad behavior. So, at the time I think that it's urgent to improve the qualification of education.

Tutor A:

You know, Lebanon is known for its education. Since we were young, we were told that Lebanon has very good education. People come from outside to study in Lebanon. But as I grew up, as I grew up and as I studied the education and I thought, and I had a psychological point of view. I realized that our curriculum sucks. It sucks because there are no equal opportunities for everyone. You know, the world is much more advanced than we are now. So, at the time that they built this curriculum, it was great. It was top of the world, but they haven't upgraded it since 1900 (something). So, it's not up to date with the world right now, and the teachers are underpaid like they are in many countries in the world. They are overworked and they are struggling to survive and their kids and everyone. So, I can assure you that once we fix the education system, everything will go hand in hand, which goes back to the base.

Researcher:

Given the importance of the role that Religious Leaders play in their communities, what are the most relevant and effective points that you consider to be important for building inter-community peace?

Tutors:

Religious Leaders?

Researcher:

Yes, because the religious leaders, their speech has the power to direct people for peacebuilding or to extremist ideas.

Tutor A:

Religious leaders are thought to be the most extremist's people. So, you know, in the DLR we do the, you know, the dialogue between the different religious leaders, we have them sit in the same space and discuss some matters. And when you go down to the base, all the religions we have the same base, the same mission, the same the same goals in life, but our views differ, our strategies differ, and when you have this understanding that you know we are all living for the same purpose, to be happy, to live a fulfilling life, because this is what all the religions speech do you think there's a religion that teaches that you shouldn't be a good person? No. All religions reach that. You should be a good person. The techniques are different. The ways are different, but that's normal because we must be different. We can't all be like robots all the same. So, religious leaders, their role comes in their speeches. Let's say at church, because, you know, after we read the part of the of the Bible, the preacher has to explain it. Mostly from the churches I've been to, they explained it from a humane way, so I feel like it's less about Jesus said that. Jesus said this and more of how to actually integrate it into your life. So this is the first step, but I'm not very qualified to speak on the matter because religious leaders are very controversial. Sometimes they are. Sometimes people from this religion dislike their own religious leaders, especially when they are associated politically or when they are very strick, abiding by the by the rules that they have, you know, created in their in their minds because the, you know, the Bible or the Quran or anything, it can be translate, it's written to be translated in the way that suits you. There's no strict rules. So, it's very weird to me that there is someone that's reading this Bible and preaching something that that they understood. When it could be preaching more of understanding the way you want to understand it.

Researcher:

At the same time, do you believe that, at least the religious leaders that you know, are trying to go in the direction of peacebuilding and to interreligious dialogue? Because, like

you know DLR Program about the sustainable network of religious leaders in Tripoli, works... At least they talk to each other, and they try to cooperate or be together.

Tutor A:

Yes, that's great, but they have a long way to go. Religious leaders, they have a longer way to go than education, actually. But they are stopping some of them. Some of them I know, is a priest who's actually, is a doctor at the university. He teaches at university. This is very like if this person comes to me, this priest comes to me and tells me something about my religion. I am more open to listening to him because I know that he's not only based upon religion, he's also based on science. He's based on experience. He has no, no bad prejudice.

Tutor B:

The religious leaders... Can I affect them? No. Can they affect me? Yes.

Donc si on peut parler de la polarisation et des polarisations ici c'est tout ce qui est dépolarisé donc teachers avocats, les personnes qui doivent être justes. Et là au fond ce sont les personnes les plus polarisées et je pense personnellement que ce sont les personnes les leaders. Est-ce qu'ils jouent un rôle primordial? Oui, bien sûr. Est-ce qu'il le joue bien? Je ne pense qui suis-je pour juger? Personne. Mais personnellement je pense pas qu'ils jouent leur rôle au mieux. Bien sûr pas tout le monde, pas tous les les personnes religieuses, mais la plupart la majorité. Donc, mais je suis sûre que ces personnes, si ils sont conscients et si ils pensent vraiment à ce qu'ils sont en train de faire et combien ils ils mettent un impact dans la vie de personne, ils peuvent tout changeait. Est-ce que vous connaissez le coup d'État?

Researcher:

Non.

Tutor B:

Le coup d'État, c'est quand l'armée vise l'état et elle veut tout changer... It's when the Army takes the rule of the government, when the government has a problem, the Army takes the power.

Donc je pense je c'est une métaphore si vous voulez. Donc je pense que que ces personnes sont capables de faire un coup d'État, donc de faire un grand changement de tout le changer. Et si ces personnes change, tous qui est en bas change.

Tutor C:

The role is important, but just for two reasons. To discuss between us, the leader, the religions, the leaders, because many of difference between the same religions, and then discuss with the other religions to make more decrease and approach of the point of view. Because the hate of speech... The view the alliance between the religious leaders from all of the religions is that all it's against the non religion people.

Researcher:

Last one... What kind of support or resources would you like to see available to strengthen peacebuilding activities in your communities?

Tutor A:

So many... I wish, I really hope that we can go back to the summer camps and to the all the activities that we used to do and I hope that, people who left the country, seek a better future, would come back with more innovative ideas and then still them in in Lebanon, like being subjected to a different culture outside, come back and you know showcase how well we could improve the situation in Lebanon. I would love to see more of the activities we do, I would love to see people working together integrating together, having fun together openly, because everything we've been doing, you know, I wasn't. I had no idea that there were so many things being done until I went into it, into the DLR into at the Adyan, into all those. So, the outside world it's a kind of a bubble. So, I wish we could get, our voices could reach more.

Researcher:

But how do you get that? How can you reach that goal? Attending the economic crisis. It's very difficult to plan those activities without sponsor.

Tutor A:

So, you know this year, Easter Christmas, Easter and Ramadan, they were like back-to-back, and during Christmas, we had a lot of markets in in Lebanon, Christmas markets and it was an ongoing joke, that people would film and there would be like, more people that were wearing the hijab and the Christmas markets enjoying the Christmas markets and no one had a problem with it. On the contrary, we were very happy, and it was very crowded, and it really boosted the Lebanon's economy. When we came together and support each other; and then during the Ramadan there were also many activities that were done by these markets are planned by the government, by the municipalities, so we

were also going as we, I mean cushions, we're also going to those, the Iftar and the and all those activities that were done to were which were meant for Muslims, but Christians were going enjoying them, respecting them, learning them. So, it starts with the municipalities. If we want to say how we can do it, it starts, I believe with the municipalities because each village, each city has its own municipality and as I said, each village has its own religious superiority. So you know, everyone embrace what you have and be open to others, and that if you were to, you know...

Researcher:

So, do you feel that municipalities are closer to the communities?

Tutor A:

The municipalities... not the government... each government?

So, I think that municipalities are stronger than the NGOs in this matter, because the NGOs are going to reach the people who are already aware of this issue, but the municipality is when they have those activities, they reach the whole community, that's new. Also, during uh during summer we go back to the soccer example. We have soccer tournaments around the district, young kids under 16 and above 16, we have soccer tournaments, cities against each other, so this city would be the young people in this city would play against this city and then the person who wins plays against the other city. So, you're exposed to new people, new friends. You're going there. You're excited for the people who are going to win. The people who are going to lose. So, these activities should be done on a village base and then once the villages are integrated then you can move on to the whole country.

Tutor B:

I agree Johana. Et de plus, je ne pense pas que les ONG sont même s'ils peuvent sont les meilleures personnes à faire ceux-là, parce que sino non sera plus un pays libre et je pense que les municipalités, comme elle a dit, doivent être responsables de cela et je pense qu'on doit plusieurs workshops des journées Barcelone ici à sherafiyé invité tous les jeunes.

Researcher:

But the municipalities also work together with the religious leaders?

Tutor A:

Yes, the President of the municipality, he works along with the church, the leader because you know, each church has a specific leader. They also work together with the school director, and they meet up and many other to be most integrated.

Tutor B:

As well I want to let you see something... Two weeks ago, we painted stairs with young people, all together in a way of cooperation. That's a sign of cooperation in a simple task without prejudices.

Tutor C:

I agree... I don't have nothing to add.

Researcher:

Thank you. Shukran.

[Focus group with the Students of the Emotional and Educational Support \(transcribed\)](#)

Researcher:

How does cultural diversity affect relationships between young people in everyday life (school, extracurricular activities and free time)?

Student 1:

Maybe two religions, maybe Christians and Muslims can be different, maybe in their studies, like in physics and science, there are something. There are some things forbidden in their holy books, like maybe they will make some problems between each other's, because they don't agree on the same thing.

Student 2:

I don't think that the cultural diversity affects the relationship in their daily life.

Student 1:

It's not in all schools happen. There's not in all school's problem happens. Maybe in those, not in my school, it's not a problem. We don't agree on the same culture. It's not a problem in our schools.

Student 3:

Je crois qu'il y a une différence, mais dans notre école et de ma part, je crois que il n'y a pas et on doit pas avoir une différence dans notre pays, dans d'autres pays entre les 2, les 2 religions, car nous sommes tous des frères et des sœurs, on doit pas. Avoir une différence entre les 2, ça veut dire.

Student 4:

Oui, elle a fait quoi alors ? Bien sûr, la diversité que tu peux avoir un impact important sur les relations entre les gens. Elle peut ouvrir des perspectives et enrichir les interactions sociales, mais parfois aussi poser des défis dans la communication et de compréhension entre différents culturels.

Researcher:

Have you experienced or witnessed situations of discrimination or cultural intolerance in your community? How did you deal with it?

Student 1:

It always happened here in my country also it always happened but not in all the places, but it happens. There's always like discrimination between religions and the between on the skin colors. Maybe if there was a different, but not all the people. There are some people, and I've witnessed some people like that just, I am trying to work. I try to tell them to not be like this, to not be racist.

Student 2:

Je n'ai pas vu en fait ça dans notre pays, mais je vois ça dans des vidéos dans des autres pays, non pas dans notre pays, ça veut dire et comme il a dit. En fait, moi je n'ai pas aucune problème avec ça et je suis tous comme comme une sœur avec tous les gens, ça veut dire.

Student 3:

Pour le moment, c'est combien je ne vois, pour moi, c'est comme l'air, je ne vois pas le nom des personnes. La discrimination est fréquente au Liban et un problème de connexion.

Researcher:

What factors do you think contribute to the rise of religious extremism?

Student 3:

The policy, the politics and the bad mindset that people put in their mind that we are different. And yes, that's it.

Student 1:

We don't need to think that we are different. We need to think that we are all brothers. If if you have enemies, we need to love our enemies, like we don't need to make enemies, we need to make friends to help, to build our society, to build a better education.

Student 4:

The family, politics...

Student 1:

Also, politics can make a difference. Maybe there are men, even in Lebanon. There is so many, so many political parties, and it makes a big influence. It makes a big influence on the religions also.

Student 2:

Voilà les enseignants dans les écoles, si different avec la communication.

Researcher:

So, in the general, you believe that the politics put people more apart and you feel that they start to fuel a little bit this kind extremism?

Student 1:

Yes, but it's not all politics. It's a part that makes difference.

Student 3:

Also France. The relationship between France.

Researcher:

But, somehow, in you community you can see the rising of extremism?

Student 1:

Yes, it sometimes happened here. Of course you know, there are so many differences here.

Researcher:

But usually, how old are they?

Student 1:

Our ages (between 14 to 18).

Student 2:

Different ages, but usually teenagers like us.

Researcher:

Do you have difficulties to play games or have friendly conversations with people of different religions or cultures?

Student 2:

No. We are used too be together beside the differences.

Student 1:

Because our parents and teachers and school taught us to love each other, and to having friends from different religions, if we want to maintain this relationship between friends, we don't need to so much be religious. I this is my opinion.

Student 3:

The other religions might be more having friends from different than our religion is better than having a friend from the same religion that we are in. We don't need to defer.

Student 2:

Il y a différences entre les religions et il y a des jeunes qui sont bons, d'autres religions.

Student 4:

I think in our country there's no difference, and in Lebanon, we can be friends easily with someone else because we are in this country in Lebanon, we can be friends easily with everyone.

Student 2:

There is no problem and sometimes people have friends from other religions, and perhaps they help you more than people of your religion.

Researcher:

What do you think that, can you do to build peace in your school and community with DLR?

Student 2:

I think that we could do awareness campaign and let them know that there is no problem being with each other.

Student 1:

We can link in maybe in schools or anywhere we can make with each other some activities that can approach us to each other to make to, to make the relationships and create happiness with each other and to love each other and to not let the religion take on our relationships.

Student 3:

We work on activities and initiatives that aim to build peace, peace, promote understanding and co-operation, and protect human rights. We are working on working between different communities. This is where we work as projects or initiatives to build building, peace, understanding and co-operation.

Student 4:

I am of the opinion that this thing should go away from us, but we should also conduct awareness campaigns for parents, so that they can sit down and teach their children not to discriminate between each other. The biggest role of teachers is to ensure that the information is reassuring to the students.

Student 1:

I want to add something. I was saying that we should be all equal. We should have all equal rights to not see others different from us to make to be equal, equal rights, equal opportunities.

Researcher:

One more question. In your schools there are a discipline or mini course about peace education, peacebuilding or pacific coexistence? Something around these topics.

Student 1:

They sometimes do that, but not it's not in our program, but from time to time, they make some sessions to “wake up” students, but not all the time. It's not in our program.

Student 4:

So, teachers might do awareness for student on this topic and they put the notes on discipline. They put a note on the on the report. If there is bad note in the behavior, they may not let us go next year into that school.

Student 2:

I think that education might help the student because there are courses that teach them to be more tolerant.

Consent to Participate in a Focus Group Discussion

I, _____, hereby consent to participate in a focus group discussion, that will be audio recorded by Rui Lobo Correia, PhD student in Education in University of Beira Interior (Portugal), as part of a research project entitled “Education and Prevention of Religious Extremism in Scenarios of Silent Conflict: A Case Study of Lebanon” which aims to understand how non-formal education can prevent religious extremism in co-operation with the religious communities, using Lebanon as a case study.

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary, and I may choose not to answer any question or withdraw my consent at any time without any consequences;
- The information collected during the interview will be used solely for research purposes and will be kept confidential;
- My identity will be kept confidential in the dissemination of the results, and only aggregated information will be used;
- The audio records will be destroyed after the research conclusion;
- I will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview and I can contact Rui Lobo Correia at any time to clarify any doubts about the study or my participation.

I authorize the use of the information provided by me during the interview for the purposes mentioned above.

Lebanon, ____ April 2024

Signature:

Consent to Participate in a Focus Group Discussion (minors)

I, _____, the legal guardian of _____, hereby consent allow my child to participate in a focus group discussion, that will be audio recorded by Rui Lobo Correia, PhD student in Education in University of Beira Interior (Portugal), as part of a research project entitled “Education and Prevention of Religious Extremism in Scenarios of Silent Conflict: A Case Study of Lebanon” which aims to understand how non-formal education can prevent religious extremism in co-operation with the religious communities, using Lebanon as a case study.

I understand that:

- My child participation is voluntary, and I may choose not to answer any question or withdraw my consent at any time without any consequences;
- The information collected during the interview will be used solely for research purposes and will be kept confidential;
- My child identity will be kept confidential in the dissemination of the results, and only aggregated information will be used;
- The recordings will be destroyed at the end of the research;
- My child will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview and I can contact Rui Lobo Correia at any time to clarify any doubts about the study or my participation.

I authorize the use of the information provided by me during the interview for the purposes mentioned above.

Lebanon, ____ April 2024

Guardian Signature:

Participant Signature:

Consent to Participate in a Semi-Structured Interview

I, _____, hereby consent to participate in a semi-structured interview that will be audiotaped by Rui Lobo Correia, PhD student in Education in University of Beira Interior (Portugal), as part of a research project entitled “Education and Prevention of Religious Extremism in Scenarios of Silent Conflict: A Case Study of Lebanon” which aims to understand how non-formal education can prevent religious extremism in co-operation with the religious communities, using Lebanon as a case study.

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary, and I may choose not to answer any question or withdraw my consent at any time without any consequences;
- The information collected during the interview will be used solely for research purposes and will be kept confidential;
- My identity will be kept confidential in the dissemination of the results, and only aggregated information will be used;
- The audio records will be destroyed after the research conclusion;
- I will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview and I can contact Rui Lobo Correia at any time to clarify any doubts about the study or my participation.

I authorize the use of the information provided by me during the interview for the purposes mentioned above.

Lebanon, ____ April 2024

Signature:
