
The myths a country tells itself

How Lebanon's narratives about the conflict conceal the disagreement at its core

By Dr. Wissam Saade

CORE GROUP

POL02202605



A nation is held together not only by its institutions but by its stories, and some of those stories are myths in the exact sense: frameworks that organise collective memory while simplifying, moralising, and concealing what they claim to describe. This issue examines the myths Lebanon tells itself about its conflict with Israel, not to debunk them for sport, but because of what they are built to hide. Beneath the shared slogans lies a disagreement so fundamental that the country has chosen, for decades, to narrate over it rather than face it.

I.

National communities are sustained by narrative as much as by administration. This is not a Lebanese peculiarity; it is, as scholars of nationalism from Benedict Anderson to Jan Assmann have argued, how political communities cohere at all. But narratives can harden into political myths: frameworks that no longer describe events so much as discipline them, organising historical experience into a shape the community finds bearable. The myth's value is not its accuracy. It is its capacity to be held in common, or to seem to be.

Lebanon's myths about the conflict with Israel have a distinctive social grammar. They are circulated with a quiet reciprocal courtesy across the sectarian lines: *you indulge my myth, I indulge yours*. Each community is permitted its preferred story, on the tacit condition that it permit the others theirs. The arrangement keeps the peace among Lebanese. It does so by ensuring that the country never has to discover how little its stories actually agree. To demythologise them, in the sense the intellectual historians intend, is not to discard collective memory but to interrogate the assumptions and silences through which it works, and to ask what the courtesy is protecting.

II.

Take first the founding contrast: Lebanon as the land of Christian-Muslim coexistence, set against Israel as the state that makes religion the ground of nationhood. It is a flattering self-portrait, and it is substantially an invention. Its architect was the mercantilist ideologue Michel Chiha, who cast the difference as an ancient economic rivalry, Phoenician trader against Hebrew, cedar against the Temple, a mythical antagonism reaching back millennia. **The portrait required a deletion to function.** To draw Lebanon as a clean Christian-Muslim duality, its own Jewish presence had to be written out of the national memory, beginning with the Jewish quarter of Beirut and continuing through a public eagerness to forget that the country had ever been otherwise.

The deletion has a price that is not only moral. Because the Jewish component is erased, the comparison the myth invites, Lebanon against Israel, two small, plural, communally organised polities, cannot actually be conducted; it sits under a taboo. What stands in for analysis is the epic register: Ahiram and Solomon, kings converging in a legendary past, in place of any sober structural study of how two such societies actually resemble and differ

from one another. The myth does not merely flatter. It forecloses the very comparison that might teach Lebanon something about the state it claims to stand against.

Take next the myth of deferral: that Lebanon “will be the last to sign” a peace with Israel. It presents as resolve; it functions as reassurance. It promises domestic audiences that whatever comes, their country will not be first, not exposed, not the one that decided. But the queue the phrase imagines has emptied. Most Arab states have signed agreements or moved toward them; there is no line for Lebanon to be last in. **“Last to sign” once purchased time. It now purchases only the feeling of a decision deferred that events have already overtaken.** The myth persists not because it is true but because it lets the question stay closed.

III.

Strip the myths away and the thing they were built to cover becomes visible. Lebanon is not of one mind about Israel, and the division runs deeper than tactics. It is not a disagreement about whether to deter, negotiate, or resist. It is a disagreement about what Israel fundamentally is. For one part of the country it is an existential enemy and a colonial implantation; for another, a hostile but ordinary neighbouring state; for another, a regional fact to be managed and in time normalised. These are not points on a single scale that could be averaged into a national position. They are incompatible first premises about the nature of the thing.

This is what the courtesy of mutual indulgence exists to keep quiet. So long as each community may hold its own story undisturbed, the country need never confront the absence of a shared one. The myths are not failures of clarity; **they are the mechanism by which an unresolved foundational disagreement is kept from becoming an open crisis.** They are, in their way, a peace, the internal peace of a society that has agreed not to ask itself the question it cannot answer together.

IV.

That is where this conceptual ground-clearing ends and a harder, more practical question begins, which the analytical track will take up on its own terms. A country may narrate over its divisions indefinitely in calm weather. It cannot do so at the negotiating table. The moment Lebanon must face an interlocutor and state what it wants, the absence of a shared premise stops being a private comfort and becomes a public incapacity, because a negotiating position is precisely the thing a divided country cannot generate from indulged and incompatible myths.

The myths, in other words, have a shelf life, and it expires exactly when they are most needed. **The first reckoning Lebanon owes is not with its adversary but with itself, and the myths examined here are the precise instruments by which that reckoning has been postponed.** Naming them is not a move in anyone’s political programme. It is the removal of a screen, and what stands behind the screen, the question of what Lebanese actually believe they are in conflict about, is the one the country will have to answer before any position toward Israel can be

more than a performance of a unity that is not there.

NOTE

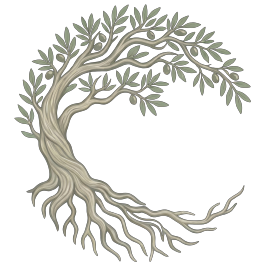
On political myth and collective memory: Benedict Anderson, Jan Assmann. On demythologisation as method: Rudolf Bultmann, and in conflict studies John Paul Lederach. The construction of enmity itself, and the post-Ottoman genealogy of the conflict, are treated in separate Pemos issues; the operational consequence for Lebanon's negotiating capacity is treated in the Statecraft track.

ABOUT CORE GROUP

Core Group is a Beirut-based strategic foresight house. We produce decision-ready analysis and advisory for governments, diplomatic institutions, and strategic investors navigating Middle Eastern complexity. Our work integrates structured analytical products, applied strategic advisory, and analysis-informed mediation; delivered on daily and weekly cycles calibrated to the speed at which the situation changes.

ABOUT POLEMOS

Polemos is Core Group's track of philosophical and historical critique: long-form essays that interrogate the inherited concepts through which the region is read, and trace today's conflicts to the ruptures that produced them.



CORE GROUP

Archive code POL02202605

beirutcore.com

info@beirutcore.com

