



USING MEDIA TO ENGAGE WITH LEBANESE YOUTH ON IDENTITY AND SOCIAL COHESION

Children & Youth Case Study Series

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Introduction

Young men clap one another on the back and slap high-fives as they crowd into a locker room. Practice will begin soon, and the guys all laugh as they change into their football clothes. An older man hobbles in behind them, his bad leg dragging on the tile floor: the coach. A war veteran, stoic and even-tempered, the coach has seen his share of violence in a country torn apart by war and hatred. But this team of young footballers gives him hope. Noise fills the room. Lockers creak open and slam shut as the guys take out their sneakers and t-shirts, put away their school gear and backpacks. Their laughter and chatter drown out the coach's voice as he greets them and readies them for practice.

One of the guys takes off his shirt. Across the room, another freezes. He stares at his teammate, and his eyes zero in on the necklace around the other guy's throat. A cross: the symbol of Christianity. Other teammates notice. One by one, they fall quiet and they tense. A moment ago the room had been full of laughter, but now there is only silence and anticipation.

The first player takes off his own t-shirt. A silver scimitar glints against the skin at the base of his neck. He wears a necklace of his own: Zulfigar, an important symbol for Shi'a Muslims in Lebanon. A Christian and a Muslim stare each other down like circling lions while the rest of the team watches with bated breath. The Christian player swallows hard and grits his jaw. Strong defiance in his eyes, he lifts the cross to his lips and kisses the cool metal. The Muslim player watches and then slowly mirrors the gesture. He kisses the sword, touches it to his forehead in reverence, and then lets the pendant drop back to his chest.

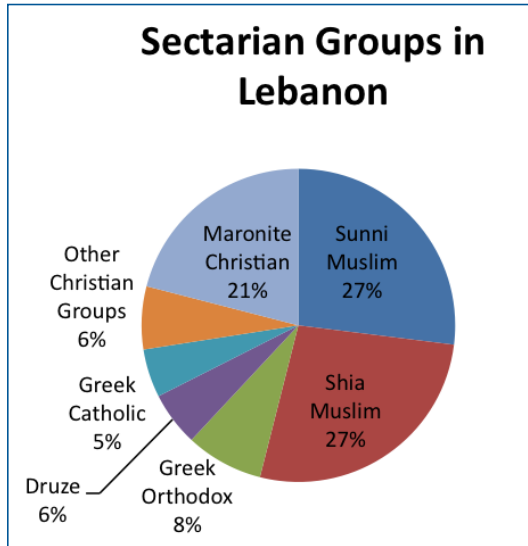
The Muslim and the Christian player glare at each other for one more second, their eyes locked together in this silent challenge. Tension crackles through the air like an electric charge. Every other player fears that any moment all this pressure must explode. The coach stands helplessly to the side and watches his team crumble. Surely, they will fight.

The Muslim player nods. The Christian nods back. They both lower their eyes and turn away.

A sigh of relief slumps through the coach's shoulders as the moment fades. He tells the guys to hurry up. Football practice is about to begin.

Inspired by the small daily hostilities between young people of different religions and identity groups in Lebanon, this scene comes from Search for Common Ground's television drama, *The Team*. *The Team* may be a fictional TV show, but many of its narratives represent a reality for Lebanese youth, where opportunities for Christians and Muslims to interact are rare and often tense.

The religiously diverse country of Lebanon established its independence in 1943, and leaders believed cooperation was possible between different groups. Bechara al-Khouri, the Maronite Christian President, and Riad al-Solh, the Sunni Muslim Prime Minister, agreed that the different identities in Lebanon should share political, religious and social power within the country. To keep the balance and ensure representation from different groups, Lebanon established a confessional political system where each group would select its own representatives. However, the religious,



A SMALL NUMBER OF JEWS, BAHAIS, BUDDHISTS, HINDUS, AND MORMONS ALSO LIVE IN LEBANON. (SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.STATE.GOV/J/DRL/RLS/IRF/202/NEA/208400.HTM](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/202/nea/208400.htm))

“Our society is not so lovely. We don’t accept one another. Nobody tries to see other’s points of views or other’s capabilities in order to develop them and use them for something useful in society. I have Lebanese nationality but I am not Lebanese. I am human. Nationality is an obstacle between people.”

Ahmed Trabouisi

social and political divide that was already simmering in Lebanon did not yield to the goal of equality. The confessional system, intended to balance representation, only served to reinforce and harden the dividing lines between groups in Lebanon. This societal divide has been the cause of multiple wars in the 20th century, and within the past thirty years Lebanon has withstood additional foreign wars, military occupations, and political instability.

The confession-based sectarian political system reinforces competition between Christian and Muslim, or between Sunni and Shi’a. Lebanon’s 17 recognized sect-based confessions fight for dominance in a polarized culture of contentious identities. Economic trouble and class-based inequality fan more embers of tension between groups. The impacts of these divides damage the entire country, but youth are affected more radically than anyone. Mistrust tarnishes relationships between youth and makes differences feel insurmountable. Youth aged 15-25 represent approximately one-fifth of the country’s population.ⁱ They face significant economic difficulties, including 70% youth unemploymentⁱⁱ and challenges in the education system. School is no escape from sect-based or class-based conflict. Most children and youth attend schools of their own religious affiliation,ⁱⁱⁱ and class-based segregation perpetuates when wealthy or middle class parents send their children to private schools while poorer children attend public schools.^{iv} This daily separation ensures that children have little exposure to other groups, no chance to make friends with other children outside of their own identities, and little opportunity to escape from a cycle of division. With all of these factors constantly reminding them that they are fundamentally different from one another, Lebanese youth are torn apart.

As the country simmers with mistrust and suspicion that could again boil over into violent conflict, children and youth in Lebanon need to focus on not just their differences, but also their commonalities. A shared national identity that embraces diversity and respects difference could strengthen Lebanon’s resilience to violence. But how can youth learn to overcome their differences when their culture and institutions encourage them to be enemies? How can messages for unity reach youth in a way that resonates with their passions and interests? A bounty of forces acts to keep youth in Lebanon separate. How can they learn to come together? The key question youth

“My dream is that people would stop saying ‘I am Christian, I am Muslim, I am Shi’a, I am Catholic.’ My dream is that they will just say ‘I am Lebanese’.”

Jana Nouery

then no one will win. The show also explores their lives off the field, including personal obstacles they face and daily struggles they must overcome.

In Lebanon, *The Team* addresses real-life issues faced daily in the community, and the characters represent the various religious, political and socioeconomic backgrounds of Lebanon. *The Team* encourages viewers to reflect on social issues they themselves face, and prompts them to consider how to peacefully resolve issues that involve multiple and overlapping identities. Positive choices and peaceful, nonviolent resolution of conflicts in the show promotes role models of behavior for young viewers. The show, written by local Lebanese screen writers and with input from focus groups of young people, encourages viewers to reflect on themes of conflict and identity.

Building on *The Team* TV Series: An Alternative Media Strategy

Through years of peacebuilding experience, SFCG knows that media alone is not sufficient to inspire behavioral and societal change. While the television program served as an effective first step, the project needed a mechanism to engage with young people and encourage them to internalize and practice *The Team*'s lessons. With that in mind, SFCG created another program to complement *The Team*. This program was called “Building on *The Team* TV Series: An Alternative Media Strategy,” and it aimed to improve social cohesion among young people in Lebanon.

Implementing a Strategy for Social Cohesion among Lebanon’s Youth

The “Building on *The Team* TV Series: An Alternative Media Strategy” project was centered on the same themes that were present in *The Team*. The project was designed with three separate stages. The **first** focused on how *The Team* provided positive role models for youth, and encouraged young people to come together despite their differences. The **second** stage involved youth analyzing their identities through workshops, training sessions, and other hands-on exercises. In the **third** and final stage, youth demonstrated their own personal change by creating video statements about their identities. These stages are referenced below.

Identity role models on TV

- The 13-episode drama, *The Team*, a series about a football team overcoming differences
- The 30-minute, youth-led documentary, *My Life on December 9*, showcasing personal and social identity formation in 15 young people

Conversations on Social Identity

- Thirty dialogue sessions with 900 young people throughout Lebanon
- A one-day improvisational theatre workshop analyzing identity
- Four, one-day Training of Trainers workshops with 90 young people



SOCIAL COHESION—BUILDING ON *THE TEAM*: AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA ATRATEGY

Sharing understanding of identities

- Four one-day workshops with young people to discuss their conceptualization of the Lebanese identity
- “Shoot your identity”, a video contest analyzing personal and social identity issues by young people

These three stages engaged young people and encouraged them to discover and analyze the complex, multiple layers of their own personal identities. As each of them recognized the many different elements of their own identities, this led into a discussion about the multiple layers of Lebanese identity. The project encouraged young people to consider this question: if a person can have many different layers to their individual identity, then why can't a country have a complex and multi-faceted identity as well? Through these different stages, young people in Lebanon explored the notion that having multiple layers of social and personal identities is a norm in a country that is rich with many different ethnicities, religious beliefs, and diverse cultures. They also reflected on why it is important that these various identities are reasons for celebration and unity, rather than divide. Each stage of the project built towards this goal.

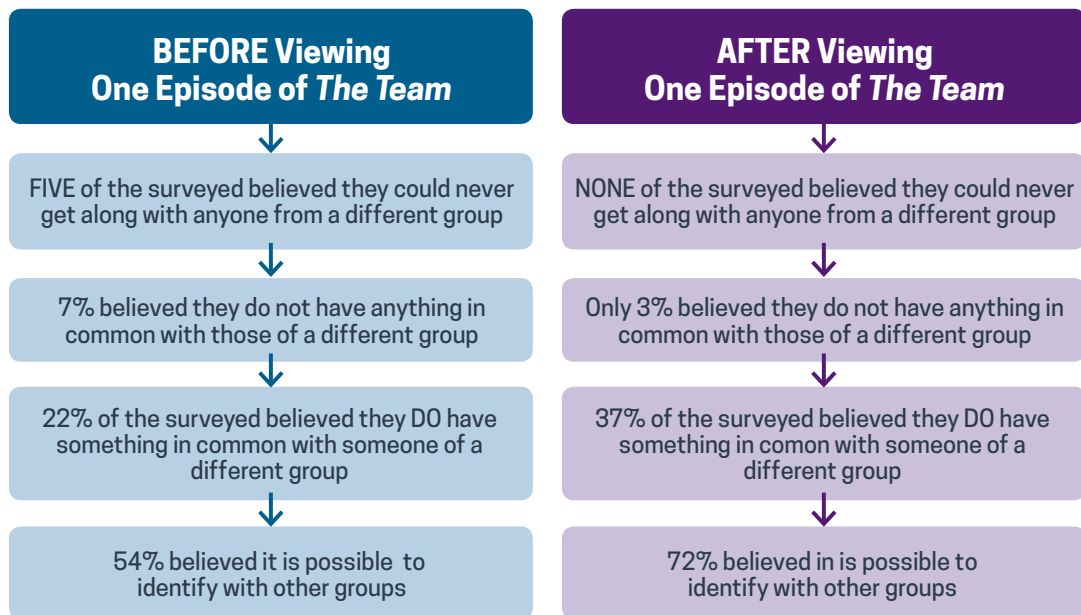
Stage I: Social Transformation through Television

The televised soap opera, *The Team*, launched the first stage. Working with local partners, SFCG produced thirteen episodes and broadcast them across Lebanon. The TV show followed the journey of *The Team* members as they discovered their multiple identities and overcame the internal collision of competing personal and social identities. At the same time, characters had to cope with the struggles of their daily lives, including moments when they were confronted with violence. The characters were initially mistrustful of one another, but their choices and actions made them role models of nonviolence and inclusion.

During the broadcast of the series, SFCG hosted social media platforms for fans to share their thoughts and opinions concerning the show. These social media platforms included *The Team*'s website, Facebook, and Twitter pages. This online conversation allowed young people to reflect on the themes portrayed by *The Team* while connecting with others and applying these themes to their own experiences.

After the fan base was established, SFCG worked with a small group of Lebanese young people to create the documentary titled, “My Life on December 9th in Lebanon.” Fifteen young people created this youth-led documentary telling the stories of their identities. The compelling and relatable stories in the documentary built on *The Team*’s themes of identity and finding common ground.

SFCG also hosted multiple public community screenings of *The Team* to bring the conversation out of people’s living rooms and into shared community spaces where people from different groups could watch the show together. Surveys at one such screening demonstrated the powerful impacts of this television drama. At an episode screening, SFCG conducted a pre- and post-test to measure changes in attitudes and perceptions. 362 viewers participated in the survey, and 63 percent of these participants were young people. The survey provided a glimpse into the shift of attitudes towards identity after watching *The Team*. The results of the survey showed that *The Team* was capable of achieving its intended effects, and it had the ability to inspire positive shifts in attitudes about diversity and identity. Although the below results do not represent the full extent of the change in attitude for all *The Team* viewers, they do provide a snapshot of *The Team*’s ability to trigger change.



PRE- AND POST-EXPOSURE SURVEYS DEMONSTRATE THE ATTITUDE CHANGES CAUSE BY “THE TEAM”

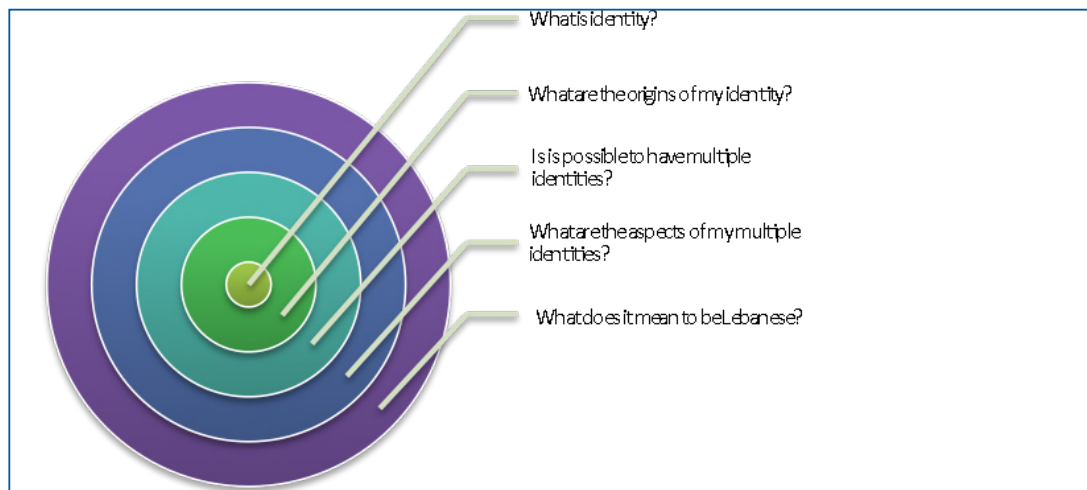
Stage II: Conversations on Identity

The next stage of the project asked youth to get involved hands-on and participate in direct activities. One aim of the project was for youth to express their own concepts of positive, inclusive identity. To empower youth to do this, SFCG organized events and workshops to increase youth capacities and to encourage youth to reflect on their identities and relationships in a new way.

Youth analyzed their own identities through workshops, participatory improvisational theatre, and trainings. They explored many questions through these workshops, and the exercises helped them develop their own insights on topics related to identity. The activities included:

- Thirty dialogue sessions with 900 selected young people
- A one-day improvisational theatre workshop that identified personal and social identities
- Four one-day Training of Trainers workshops with 90 selected young people

During these dialogue sessions, young people were encouraged to tell their own stories concerning their understanding of what identity means to them. Through storytelling and dialogue, the participants of these dialogue sessions were able to identify what personal and social identities mean to them and how to reconcile with the multiple layers of social and personal identity within themselves. Secondly, young people involved in the improvisational theatre workshop expressed themselves through wordplay and performance. These expressive actions allowed the young people to physically and verbally explore their personal and social identities in a safe place. Finally, in the Training of Trainers workshops, the participants were trained to be facilitators of dialogue and other activities that explore the concept of personal and social identities. The workshops encouraged them to bring these new skills back home and facilitate dialogue in their own communities. While SFCG utilized various activities for young people to explore the concepts of personal and social identity, the common thread that linked these activities were the similar questions on identity in a diverse country.



QUESTIONING THE LAYERS OF IDENTITY

Stage III: Sharing Identity through Creative Expression

For the third stage of the project, SFCG invited young people to create their own short videos to explore and express their identities. This activity was a video contest, called “Shoot Your Own Identity”. SFCG encouraged young people to film a short video to not only talk about their understanding of their identities, but also about the stories of their community, neighbors, families, and friends. In the videos, young people showed their homes, their communities, and the places

most important to them. They talked about their families, their friends, their hobbies. They explored their own ethnicities and religions while commenting on identity divides in Lebanon. They shared their ideas for the future, their hopes and their plans. In each video submission, young people filmed a small glimpse into their lives and told the camera, “This is what makes me *me*.” The submissions were varied and diverse, but overall they demonstrated that many youth in Lebanon hold complex understandings of their own identities. They see themselves as many things, and they want to find common ground with other groups.

The videos, hosted on YouTube, offer insight into the culturally diverse lives of young people who call Lebanon their home. These are some of their stories:

Walid Chehayab	A young engineer who wants to help build Lebanon’s future. A quiet young adult who loves to always help out his friends. A young man who wants a Lebanon where people help out each other notwithstanding who and what they are.
Carine Arouch Mansoura	A teenager worried and afraid of all the wars surrounding Lebanon, fearful that another sectarian war could tear her country apart.
Aya Bazi	A teenager raised in an orphanage with no village or family to call home. A teenager who loves to be around people. A teenager who is afraid of living in a world where people do not help others.
Rayan Daoud:	A young adult who believes Lebanon is the best place in the world. A young adult who is heartbroken when Lebanese people find it extremely difficult to accept the idea of others.
Ahmed Traboussi:	A young entrepreneur who does not see himself as a Lebanese, but rather as a human. A young adult who loves to find the common interest between people and learn from them.
Rabih Ahmed Tyr	A young Palestinian living in Lebanon. A young adult working with children and youth from Palestine to prepare them to return to Palestine.
Hadyl Al Achkar	A university student who dreams of an intellectual society conscious of what is happening around them, not a society that merely follows whoever thinks to be a leader.



MEMBERS OF A YOUTH COUNCIL DISCUSS THE “SHOOT YOUR IDENTITY” COMPETITION

Their own words best capture the impact of the project: the young people in Lebanon are moving towards more inclusive identities and a willingness to accept difference. After all, if young Lebanese people’s personal identities are so complex and multi-faceted, then why can’t Lebanon express the same harmonious diversity in its own cultural identity?

These young people were able to capture the essence of what makes Lebanon uniquely Lebanon. They dream of an inclusive Lebanon, a diverse Lebanon, a united Lebanon, and a Lebanon without wars. They question why Lebanon as a country fails to celebrate its

diversity. Most importantly, these young adults were brave enough to ask Lebanon why it is difficult for the country to explore its diverse identities without fear or prejudice.

Challenges

Though the TV show and project reached many youth and inspired many conversations about identity, it did experience challenges in implementation and evaluation. These challenges yield lessons for future projects.

One of intentions of this outreach project was to engage with youth outside of major city centers. Youth in Beirut have access to a multitude of peacebuilding projects and initiatives, and they regularly participate in outreach campaigns. Youth in other regions of Lebanon, however, often have little exposure to projects such as this one. *The Team* TV show was accessible for youth across the country, but SFCG made an effort to bring project activities directly to youth in regions outside of Beirut, to the areas of Lebanon often ignored by media or NGOs. This had positive impacts, but presented challenges and difficulties.

The largest positive impact of outreach to rural, marginalized, or underserved communities was that youth from these areas had an opportunity to express their ideas on identity. Their voices found an audience through SFCG's workshops and Youtube-hosted videos. This also engaged new youth in peacebuilding efforts. In Mansoura, for example, youth had never participated in peacebuilding activities before. But by the end of the project, 15 of the young people were highly engaged and expressed an interest in working with SFCG for future projects. This strategy was essential in ensuring the voices of diverse Lebanese youth – including those who often lack economic or educational opportunities – contributed to discussions on identity.



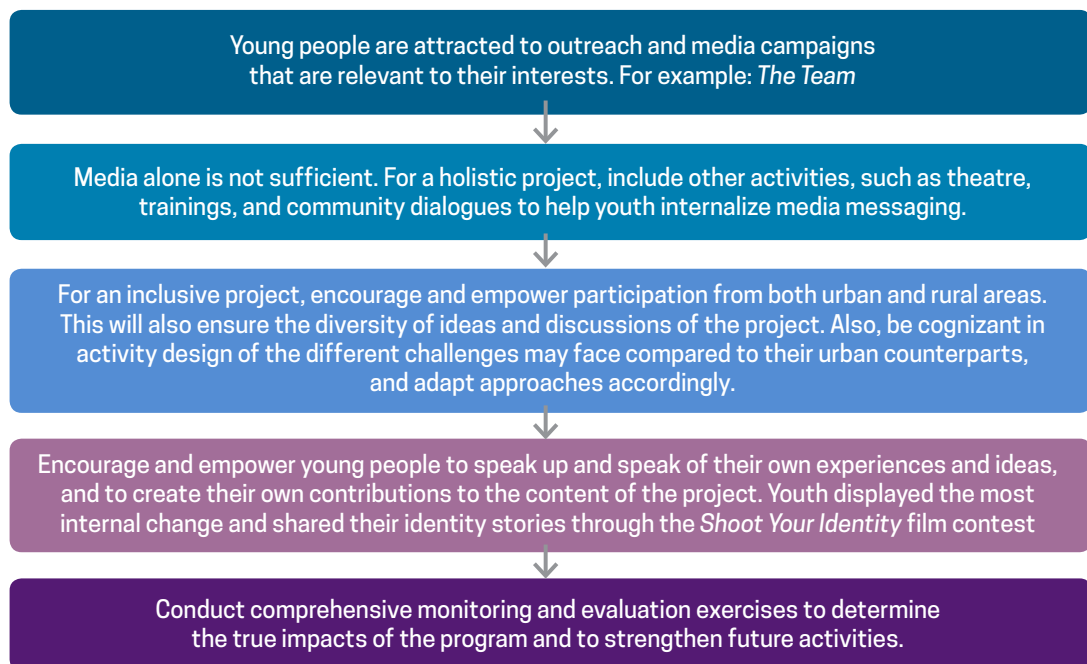
YOUNG PARTICIPANTS AT THE "SHOOT YOUR IDENTITY" AWARDS CEREMONY

However, SFCG had difficulty engaging these rural or marginalized youth in activities, especially video workshops. Unlike youth in Beirut, youth in these communities had never worked with an INGO before, and they had never participated in similar workshops. Many of them were reserved and timid, and they struggled to express themselves – especially when discussing such a complex topic as identity. To overcome this challenge, SFCG's trainers had to use sensitivity and expertise to create a safe and welcoming training environment. Youth opened up as the workshops progressed and SFCG's trainers adapted their approaches.

Additionally, this project had difficulty monitoring long-term impacts on attitude. While participants demonstrated short-term shifts in their attitudes and perceptions (both through pre- and post-tests around screenings of *The Team* and through the messaging young people created about their identities in the “Shoot Your identity” contest), long-term changes are not guaranteed. SFCG did not monitor changes closely, and as the project ended it was unclear if the impacts would survive into the future to withstand pressure from family, friends, and peers. A comprehensive evaluation could have measured these changes and investigated whether or not the changes had potential to last beyond the life of the project.

Lessons for Future Projects

With every obstacle and every success, the implementation of this project yielded valuable lessons. These lessons could inform the design of future projects that use a similar approach.



Through this project, SFCG proved that the young people in Lebanon are able to embrace their identity as a citizen of a diverse and inclusive Lebanon, and they are willing to reach beyond the divides of their sectarian differences to find friends, allies, and team mates. The young Lebanese people who participated in this project demonstrated that they hold nuanced and diverse identities, and they are willing to shift their own attitudes towards stronger acceptance of other groups. The results of this project prove that a TV show can plant the seeds of peace and young people can help those seeds grow.

Notes

- i Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs. The national survey of household living conditions 2004 and 2007. Selected characteristics of the youth population in Lebanon. May 2009. (<http://www.pdslebanon.org/UserFiles/Factsheet-9eng.pdf>)
- ii EuroMed Youth III Programme, Studies on Youth Policies in the Mediterranean Partner Countries: Lebanon, 2006 (http://euromedyouth.net/IMG/pdf/05-EuroMedJeunesse-Etude_LEBANON.pdf)
- iii Al-Habbal Jinan, The Institutional dynamics of sectarianism: Education and personal status laws in post-war Lebanon, 2011. (http://www.academia.edu/2014689/The_Institutional_Dynamics_of_Sectarianism_Education_and_Personal_Status_Laws_in_Postwar_Lebanon)
- iv Faryha Nmer, The negative face of the Lebanese education system, 2009.

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