

## A century of Lebanese documents preserve shifting identities

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**The exhibition “Identity Papers” uses old government documents and artworks to show how identity is created, informed and changed by official papers.**

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BEIRUT – “The most important thing is to get rid of the mystique of identity,” Guillaume de Vault d’Arcy, researcher and organizer of the “Identity Papers,” an exhibition at Beit Beirut, told al-Monitor. “[We have to] concentrate on the materialistic realities, administrative procedures and papers, because these are the heart of identity [formation].”

Organized by the French Institute of the Middle East, the exhibition presents an array of identity papers, passports and government permits from the last 150 years in Lebanon. The documents are complemented by artworks and installations to illustrate how identities are formed. The exhibition, which opened May 11 and runs through May 31, tackles different types of identity formation, focusing on the role of state administration in the process.

The topic is particularly relevant for Lebanon in light of the series of governments that controlled the territory in the first decades of the 20th century. During that time, each administration issued its own documents to cement its sovereignty.

Intrigued by these types of documents, Wissam Lahham, a political science teacher at Beirut’s Saint Joseph University, scoured the region to find examples of them. A selection from his collection is on display at the exhibition.

“I collect old books, property deeds, treasury bonds, coins, stamps, [etc.],” Lahham told al-Monitor. “It is a disease,” he added, laughing about his ever-growing collection.

The documents on display range from French mandate-era identity papers issued after the last census in Lebanon, in 1932, to modern passports. Collectively, they show how such papers came to be and the sometimes arbitrary nature and consequences behind them.

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, the French became trustees of the newly created Lebanese state and set out to count the local population. Two censuses, conducted in 1921 and 1932, recorded people’s confession.

Lahham explained, however, “In the census law [of the time], there was nothing that said you should record the community of the people, but they asked anyway.” This small

detail would give the censuses a pivotal role in shaping the development of the political system and its confessional component, which survives to this day.

Noticeably absent from Lahham's and many other's collection of documents are identity papers of Muslims from the French mandate period. Lahham explained, "During the first census, in 1921, when they issued the identity papers, it was boycotted by many Sunnis. They wanted to be part of Syria.... In the 19th century, if you were to say 'Lebanon,' you would mean [predominantly Christian] 'Mount Lebanon.'"

While establishing identity, the documents also reveal the impermanence of identity and how quickly populations sometimes embrace new ones. According to Lahham, the incentives that identity papers offer are key to people agreeing to accept new identities.

"The creation of a state and the creation of a legal framework over time creates interests," Lahham said. "People will get papers to [be able to] travel and such."

The 1994 Naturalization Decree, a copy of which is on display, represents another example of the power administrative papers have despite often being arbitrary. The decree bestowed citizenship on people who were overlooked by the 1932 census. According to Lahham, political interests and corruption led to many receiving citizenship who might not have received it otherwise. Determining who should receive it and who should not was difficult, as no criteria was cited. The decree itself consists of a list of nearly 100,000 unordered names. All those listed simply became citizens.

Other documents reveal commonalities. One part of such an example is a French-issued Patente de Protection from 1869, one of the oldest documents on display. This paper was issued in accordance with the contracts known collectively as the Turkish Capitulations, whereby traders and subjects of European powers were subject to European law rather than local law while on Ottoman territory. The French issued the document on display to a local merchant in Syria and Lebanon, allowing him the protection of French law.

Lahham explained that such documents came to symbolize the weakness of the Ottomans and the dominance of the European powers. D'Arcy, taking another tact, cited the parallels between protection papers and the passports of Lebanese dual nationals who also hold a French passport.

"Dual passports are like protection papers," d'Arcy told Al-Monitor, "because the French passport allows people to do things that a Lebanese one cannot.... There is a social hierarchy [inherent] in these papers."

D'Arcy also pointed to other examples of identity hierarchies, highlighting people in Lebanon subject to the kafala system, under which foreign workers are considered the responsibility of their employer, not the state, and the inability of women and Palestinians in Lebanon to pass their nationality on to their children. As regards citizenship in the latter situation, a similar law was recently repealed in Iran.

The recent influx of nearly 1 million registered Syrian refugees to Lebanon has generated another paper hierarchy. In "Identity Papers," Rabee Kiwan, a Syrian artist living in Lebanon, explores this inequality through paintings of passports overlaid with distorted images.

"[My] project revolves around the Syrian diaspora in particular and the concept of identity in general," Kiwan told Al-Monitor. "The idea emerged when I was refused entry to a

neighboring country to attend my own exhibition.” One of the paintings on display shows passport photos of friends of Kiwan with the faces variously distorted, symbolizing how identity papers “turn us into mere figures and codes, [and] rob us of our humanity.”

The final section of “Identity Papers” looks at this transformation of identities into codes and figures in an installation on identity in the digital age. Piles of computer monitors line the exhibition's exit, each showing images of new forms of documenting identity — Instagram accounts, user names for government databases and personal accounts for television streaming services.

“[On the internet], categories are hidden,” d’Arcy said. “You like something on Netflix, and you are shown things from that category, but there are hundreds of others we don’t see. Before, we were aware of different categories, now we [aren’t shown them].”

The impact that papers from a century ago made on identity hint at the immense changes that digital documentation will play in forming identity in the future, with all the mystique, hierarchies and exclusion it might bring.

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