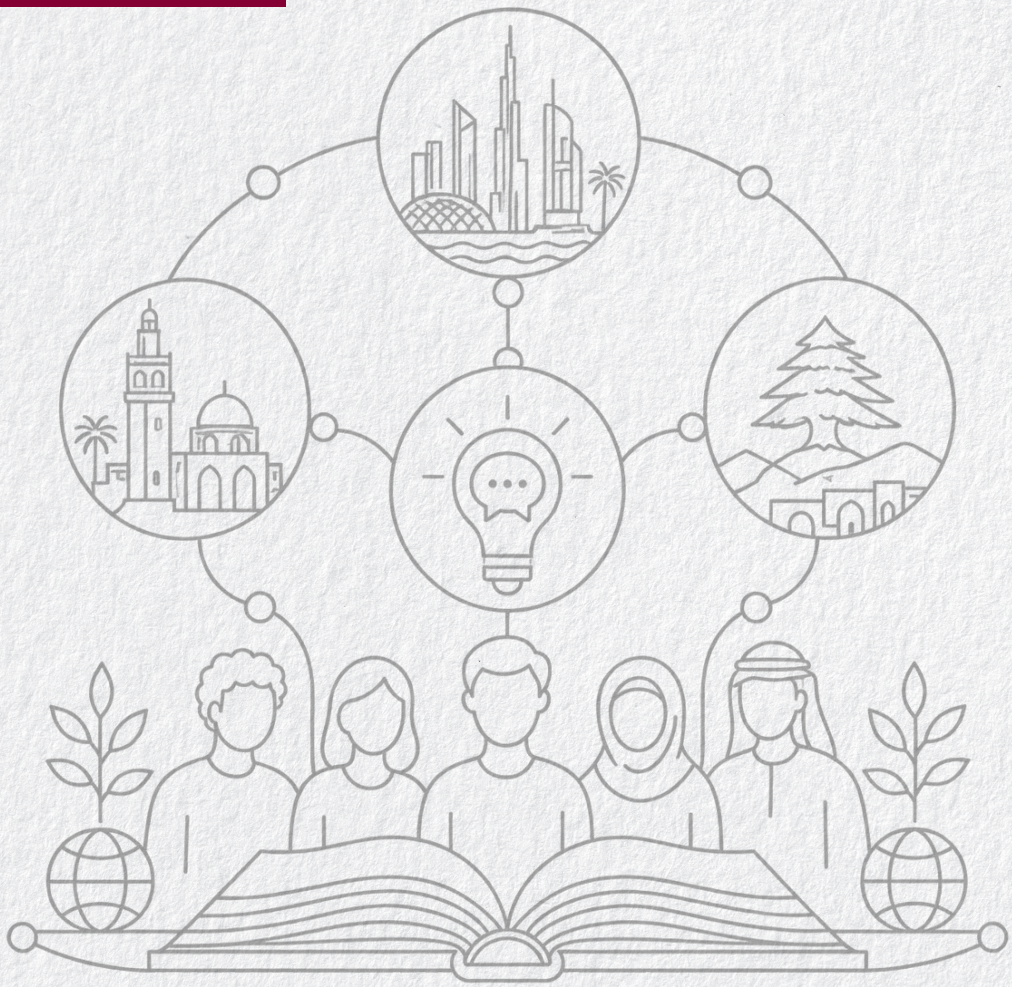
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RETHINKING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

CASE STUDIES FROM TUNISIA, THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, AND LEBANON

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1. INTRODUCTION

Citizenship has become an intricate and contested concept in the Arab World, especially in countries undergoing political transitions. Education plays a crucial role in this context as a medium allowing young people to understand, internalize, and either challenge or reproduce the status quo. The following report will theoretically frame citizenship education, engaging with both classical and contemporary theories on citizenship education, and meshing them with applications and critiques woven into regional applications.

1.1. Conceptions of Citizenship and Education

The concept of citizenship revolves around the relationship between the individual and the state, marked by an equilibrium of rights, responsibilities, and participation. A young person voting for the first time, joining a protest, accessing healthcare services- all these acts reflect different aspects of their citizenship. A person deprived of these rights and pondering the implications is also exercising citizenship. T.H. Marshall delineated three main dimensions of citizenship: civil rights consisting of individual freedoms, political rights entailing participation in governance, and social rights providing access to welfare programs (Marshall 1950, cited in Akar 2008). Osler and Starkey (2005) add that citizenship is broader than rights and responsibilities and involves identity, belonging, and active participation. A child of immigrant parents in Lebanon or the United Arab Emirates (UAE) may grow up speaking the local languages but is still seen as an outsider, which shows that citizenship is more than mere legal status. Yuval-Davis (1997) added the local, national, and global levels to citizenship. In broader terms, Isin and Wood (1999) summarize citizenship as “the right to have rights”. As most societies are diverse, Kymlicka (1995) and Young (1989) introduced “differentiated citizenship” to promote minority rights and cultural diversity within the state. This resonates today as hundreds of thousands of stateless individuals, like Palestinians in Lebanon, are denied many rights and opportunities that Lebanese citizens take for granted.

How do people come to grasp, exercise, question, and engage with citizenship’s multiple dimensions? Citizenship education helps people understand these notions that shape their identity and political engagement. An effective citizenship education addresses past and contemporary political and social challenges and enables students to critically reflect on them vis-à-vis their lives. For instance, learning about human rights through case studies of recent issues helps students see citizenship as something tangible and deterministic in their lives. Moreover, it promotes an active approach to citizenship, taking education beyond mere knowledge to participating in political life and standing up to injustices (McLaughlin 1992; Hoskins 2006, cited in Akar 2008). To achieve this, Banks (2008) argues that it must be conducted in the students’ language and reflect their culture. A Berber-speaking student in Tunisia may feel excluded from civic participation if the curriculum does not address their heritage and language. This makes citizenship education a “social project” essential to democratic engagement and nation-building (Starkey 2000, cited in Akar 2008).

1.2. Theoretical Approaches to Citizenship Education

Citizenship education is shaped by three main theoretical frameworks: Human Capital Theory, Human Rights-based Education, and the Capability Approach (Manzi 2019). The first treats education as an investment that increases economic productivity by equipping learners with the skills needed to get employed and drive economic growth. This is the logic behind programs that heavily prioritize STEM and business-oriented education, which prepares students for the job market, but not necessarily political life. The Human Capital Theory is therefore influential in policy circles but prioritizes market-driven outcomes at the expense of citizenship and social equity (Alaryani 2016).

In comparison, the human rights-based approach views education as an essential human right for equality, dignity, and emancipation, in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. For instance, in post-revolution Tunisia, this human rights approach was used to advance the inclusion of women’s rights and political pluralism in the curriculum. This approach is conducive to citizenship but faces challenges in implementation, especially under authoritarian regimes with limited political freedoms (Manzi 2019).

Amartya Sen devised the Capability Approach as a holistic framework that does not dwell on mere economic outputs but also on the real freedoms to lead meaningful lives. It not only asks what education does for the economy but also what kind of life it ensures. Children who gain both literacy skills and the ability to speak in public are building such a capability. Per this approach, education is

simultaneously an intrinsic and extrinsic good by being valuable in itself and a means to achieve political agency that shapes societies (Sen 1999 in Manzi 2019).

The Marxist perspective is more critical. It sees education as a tool of capitalism to maintain existing power structures and reinforce economic hierarchies (Bowles and Gintis 1976 in Akar 2008). This is very evident in Lebanon, where elite private schools with expensive tuition are generally reserved for higher socioeconomic strata and prepare the elite's children for leadership and emigration. On the other hand, public schools, systematically neglected and underfunded, barely offer their students a path out of poverty. Post-Marxists like Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) further argue that education's role is to legitimize inequalities and reproduce the cultural capital that maintains the status quo.

Today, neoliberal educational reforms shape school curricula to provide skills for the global market. They emphasize standardized testing and competition, which can discourage critical thinking and political engagement. They program learners to focus on employability and self-marketing rather than reflecting on injustice. Neoliberal education promotes ideological conformity and disincentivizes critical engagement for the sake of economic development and competitiveness.

1.3. Citizenship Education in the Arab World: Historical Layers and Contemporary Challenges

In a region where colonial legacies, authoritarian rule, and constant struggles for true democracy compound, critical citizenship education is quintessential. Even at its most superficial class application, it allows learners to understand their rights and responsibilities, think about their roles in society, and engage in public life, to varying extents (Abdul-Jabbar 2016; Faour and Muasher 2011). This holds a special significance in the Arab world, where different religions, ethnicities, and cultural identities intersect amidst a shifting political landscape.

Since the 2011 uprisings, the political discourse has emphasized a reimagined model of citizenship education that transcends rote learning to represent and challenge lived realities (Geha and Horst 2019). Still, centralized education, traditional teaching practices, and a lack of a political foundation often curtailed the many citizenship education initiatives that emerged. The following section will look into the evolution of citizenship education in the Arab World; its challenges and opportunities aligned with democratic aspirations.

1.4. Historical Tapestry of Education

What does being a citizen in the Arab World mean? And how has education molded citizenship over centuries? The story of education in the Arab World began with local practices founded on religious faith and cultural practices within a community, rather than formal institutions. In the Arab World, education has been mostly shaped by Islamic traditions and their interaction with changing socio-political settings. Early forms of Madrasah and Kuttab were established along mosques and taught Quran and Arabic grammar to preserve Islamic culture (Massialas and Jarrar 1987). These spaces fostered moral and communal education in pre-modern Arab societies.

This native system was later replaced by imperialism and modernization efforts. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt reintroduced Western influence as Arab leaders like Mohammad Ali revolutionized education and founded academies that taught engineering, medicine, and administration. These efforts were still curtailed by tradition and foreign control (Massialas and Jarrar 1987). In the late Ottoman era, education in the Arab World became extremely centralized and uneven. With Istanbul spearheading the reforms in education like the Tanzimat, Arab provinces lagged. Despite this reflection of the empire's internal hierarchies, Arabs engaged with global ideas through the printing press, translation, and travel, especially in Cairo and Beirut.

During colonialism, France and Britain imposed educational models that aligned with their political agendas to train some elites for administrative roles. Local culture and language were neglected in favor of European history, which alienated Arab students from their own culture. Colonial powers' schooling produced subordinate elites alienated from their national cultures and citizenship. As Edward Said reflected, colonial education taught colonized subjects to perform loyalty to the empire rather than be themselves (Alkateb-Chami and Osanloo 2024).

After independence, education became a critical front for building a national identity and reclaiming sovereignty. National movements in newly established Arab countries Arabized education by reintroducing their native language into nationalist curricula and emphasizing religious subjects without really reforming and updating pedagogical practices. Consequently, colonial structures persisted, and educational systems remained fragmented with an over-reliance on rote learning and top-down pedagogy (Massialas and Jarrar 1987).

1.5. Citizenship Education and the Arab State

After tracing the evolution of education in the Arab World, we turn to examine how states instrumentalized citizenship education at the service of political agendas. The rise of modern Arab states post-independence gave citizenship education the role of developing productive, loyal citizens. Educational programs developed in tandem with the emancipation of independent nations and their nationalist projects. It aims to equip citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary to actively participate in democratic processes. Citizenship education generally has three main components: knowledge of civic concepts, systems, and processes like democracy and human rights; skills pertaining to civic engagement and participation; and a sense of belonging to the state with shared values (Faour 2013). The knowledge component is a part of school curricula across the Arab World; students memorize definitions of democracy and articles from their constitutions. However, critical engagement and applications of such acquired information are missing. Moreover, the effectiveness and instrumentalization of citizenship education are oftentimes hindered by authoritarian states that shape education in ways that curtail critical thinking (Faour and Muasher 2011).

Civics curricula, for instance, are centered around obedience, respect for authority, and national unity. Topics like pluralism, minorities' rights, and protests are often omitted. Similarly, history curricula present a curated narrative of the nation that avoids "controversial" episodes. This paradox, whereby students learn certain notions but do not apply them and live within contradicting conditions, results in passive citizenship: people theoretically know about civic and political life but are disconnected from it.

1.6. Challenges & Opportunities

1.6.1. AUTHORITARIANISM AND POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS

Under dominant authoritarian rule, the core question facing the Arab World is the ability of schools to nurture critical citizens. The intricate historical, cultural, and political factors in the Arab World challenge citizenship education. With a colonial past followed by nationalism and allegiance to a ruling party or military regimes, diversity and critical thinking in education and political life as a whole are suppressed. Education systems were designed to protect power and not question it. It promotes loyalty to the ruling regime or the political system and portrays it as "patriotic duty". Therefore, it is now clear that achieving democracy in the Arab World not only necessitates removing dictators, but also a cultural shift, a reimagining of relationships between the state and citizens (Faour and Muasher 2011).

Citizenship education in the Arab World therefore becomes a battleground over authority, national identity, and political participation. It faces a key challenge of co-optation stemming from the nature of political systems in most countries. Authoritarianism boils down to schools and curricula, stifling freedoms and accountability (Faour 2013). This also translates to a lack of political commitment to implement stated ambitious reforms (Faour 2013; Faour and Muasher 2011).

Furthermore, newer citizenship education programs throughout the Arab World are mostly supported by foreign actors like the USA, European countries, and INGOs. While these programs aim to teach civic engagement, they mostly align with the donors' political aspirations and are thus disconnected from their countries' grassroots realities (Geha and Horst 2019). They tend to promote liberal democratic values based on Western models, which clash with local political structures and thus appear as foreign impositions.

The sweeping revolts in 2011 revealed a citizenry hungry for agency, which shifted the focus to the issue of citizenship. The protests demonstrated the desire and importance of active civic engagement and the potential of grassroots movements within the political landscape (Abdul-Jabbar 2016). These protests revealed what used to be concealed: top-down citizenship education

was not only not enough, but detrimental in the way it was. Successful efforts on the road to a democratic society are founded on robust citizenship education programs with good governance, well-equipped educators, and, mirroring the desired system transition, collaborative education instead of authoritarian practices.

Aside from subject-matter specialization, it is necessary to train teachers to promote critical thinking and equality in an interactive classroom (Faour 2013; Faour and Muasher 2011). Furthermore, an education context cohesive with citizenship better incorporates and harnesses the advances of globalization and the rise of information and communication technologies.

In sum, citizenship education in the Arab World is marked not only by contradictions but also by potential. Meaningful reforms start with relinquishing imported models in favor of grassroots participatory approaches while taking advantage of digital tools.

1.6.2. NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION: MARKET-DRIVEN POLICIES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Even as authoritarian limits remain central to the Arab World, another layer of challenges through the global spread of neoliberal education policies compounds the problems. Neoliberalism has been shaping education throughout the world. This ideology promotes economic efficiency and standardized outcomes at the expense of holistic and culturally relevant education. This shift fails to prepare students for globalization, as education falls short of equipping students with critical thinking, social responsibility, and global awareness, as evident in all three countries examined above.

Neoliberal education aims to produce a competitive workforce that bows to market demands. In Tunisia, recent developments advanced STEM education at the expense of humanities and social sciences, i.e., citizenship education that cultivates civic consciousness to engage with political realities. Similarly, technical programs have significantly expanded in the UAE under the country's economic diversification plan to equip students with labor skills. However, discussions on Human Rights and democracy are absent.

1.6.3. OVEREMPHASIS ON STANDARDIZATION AND LOSS OF CULTURAL RELEVANCE

The neoliberal framework of education allocates seminal importance to global performance metrics like PISA and TIMSS, often at the expense of citizenship education that is culturally relevant. In Lebanon, private schools that serve a large faction of students are increasingly adopting international curricula like the IB, British, American, or French systems to meet these global standards. Consequently, Arabic language and citizenship education, like the country and region's history, are sidelined. Students graduate with little understanding of their country's context and ability to engage in political issues that affect their lives.

1.6.4. NARROW DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

Under this system, academic success is exclusively achieved through high test scores, rankings, and employment rates. This reinforces a culture of competition instead of inter-school collaboration, like in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where schools are ranked based on student performance in standardized tests. Consequently, knowledge is no longer pursued for its intrinsic value and contribution to the betterment of life but rather as a step to be done off a checklist in the aim of a lucrative career path. The situation is very similar in Lebanon, where education is a means for the youth to flee an unstable country and secure employment abroad instead of cultivating a holistic worldview and knowledge about their country. This leads to brain drain and perpetuates the vicious cycle of political crises. It is a consequence of an outdated citizenship education lacking critical knowledge about such issues facing the country and their systemic origins.

When education is reduced to an economic tool as such, a healthy citizenship education becomes marginalized. Moving to Tunisia, recent reforms have also focused on employability rather than democratic engagement, reflecting a broader regional trend in this direction. This has always been the case in rentier states like the UAE, where political participation is discouraged at the expense of economic stability. Citizenship education is rebranded as a "Moral Education Program" (MEP) that shifts the focus to apolitical micro-citizenship issues to maintain social order through basic values.

1.6.5. PRIVATIZATION AND INEQUALITY

Neoliberal policies lead to privatization of education, which deepens the gap between different factions of society. Lebanon is a prime example where higher-quality education is restricted to wealthier students, while those of lower income resort to a neglected public education. This disparity reinforces the status quo and patronage networks within private schools that are mostly owned by religious and political institutions. In the UAE, there is a heavy investment in private education while public schools primarily serve the Emirati population.

1.6.6. EROSION OF TEACHER AUTONOMY AND ITS EFFECT

This system not only pressures students, but also teachers, who are subject to strict performance evaluations and standardized curricula. This limits their freedom to open critical discussions in the classroom. Stiff curricular requirements stifle chances of informal citizenship education upon which students rely in the absence of updated curricula.

1.7. A Triangular Lens on Citizenship Education in the Arab World

After examining the evolution and challenges of citizenship education in the Arab World, we turn to the scope and objectives of this report. Given the large and complex landscape of the Arab World, it is nearly impossible to analyze the citizenship education curricula of all 22 Arab countries in a single report. Instead, this paper focuses on three case studies we argue are somewhat representative of the region. Each of Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and the UAE is studied for its unique political trajectory and the way they have shaped the discourse and practice of teaching citizenship to young learners.

For starters, Tunisia is a case of post-revolutionary transition, where an uprising paved the way for a democratic transition. It was seen as an opportunity to analyze the evolution and role of citizenship education and its role in fostering democratic values, which have since faced many setbacks. The UAE, in contrast, represents a historically rentier economy with an authoritarian regime yet high GDP and stability. The country offers a citizenship education harnessed to maintain the state's authority and social cohesion. As opposed to the Emirates' stability, Lebanon is going through multiple overlapping political, economic, and social crises, coupled with instability at its borders after a war. This situation begs the question of citizenship education within a sectarian political system that omits a national identity.

Each of these countries is distinct on its own. However, these cases share similar tensions between efforts of state-building, civic and political identity, and thus educational reforms to serve such aspirations. Therefore, the main goal of this report is to analyze citizenship education curricula throughout these countries. It particularly focuses on learning methods, i.e., ways curricula discourage civic and political engagement of learners by promoting obedience through rote learning and passive citizenship. For this task, we seek to identify curricular gaps, omissions, and contradictions in teaching or oppressing rights and political agency. We also seek to explore areas for potential reforms in reforming citizenship curricula across these countries.

This report is guided by a main research question: What roles do citizenship curricula play in shaping civic identity and engagement with authority in Tunisia, UAE, and Lebanon? Under this umbrella, specific research questions were developed tailored to each country and its unique circumstances. Methodologically, this report consists of a review of the existing literature on citizenship education in each aforementioned Arab country through the lens of the specific research question. Afterwards, to triangulate the findings, qualitative interviews with stakeholders will be conducted to provide real-time perceptions on citizenship education and enrich the existing literature.

1.8. Theoretical Framework

Understanding citizenship education in Tunisia, the UAE, and Lebanon is better done through a framework that not only describes their curricula, but questions political circumstances underpinning their executions. With this objective, a Critical Education Framework is adopted throughout this report. This lens views education as an essentially political and conscious choice to serve certain

political ends, rather than a neutral, purely technical system. This framework is probably optimal in uncovering how education empowers people to become active citizens in their countries or disciplines and silences them.

The works of Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire are at the core of this theoretical framework. Both were critical theorists who questioned the role of formal education in modern societies. In Deschooling Society (1971), Illich criticized formal education for reproducing the status quo through legitimizing inequalities and silencing alternative forms of knowledge. He called for a decentralized system of learning through open and grassroots networks that allow for a more equitable and emancipatory education (Illich, 1971).

A year prior, Brazilian educator Freire (1970) produced his seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, in which he distinguished the "*banking model of education*" and the "*problem-posing*" system. The first feeds facts to passive students, and the second allows learners to reflect, question, and change their realities. Freire called for "*conscientization*," which is the development of critical awareness (Freire, 1970). This is especially relevant in examining citizenship curricula in the Arab World and how they tend to silence engagement and suppress political agency. Freire emphasized the role of dialogue as a pedagogical tool that goes in tandem with efforts to reform citizenship education in the Arab World into an inclusive and participatory nation-building process.

Freire's framework is particularly useful in this report, for it informs the analysis of curricula's content, teaching methods, and the institutional logic behind them. In Tunisia, for instance, it allows us to assess whether recent democratic reforms have increased democratic engagement or recycled control. In Lebanon, the Freirean lens helps elucidate how sectarian politics shape passive and fragmented concepts of citizenship. This framework is also instrumental in the UAE to critique how the citizenship education curriculum is used to strengthen state loyalty and silence dissent under a stable authoritarian bargain.

However, the Critical Education Framework, despite being suitable to our context, still has its limits. Both Freire and Illich emerged from South American and European contexts characterized by brutal colonial legacies, widespread poverty, and military dictatorships. Therefore, applying their ideas wholly to the Arab World, especially different regimes like Tunisia's transitional democracy and the UAE's rentier monarchy, runs the risk of obscuring the particularities and complexities of these countries.

For example, Illich's call for deschooling may look idealistic in the Lebanese context where a political and institutional collapse imposes limits on formal education. Similarly, Freire's model assumes some political freedom that is almost non-existent in the UAE. Being mindful of this, the following report uses the Critical Education Framework as a critical compass rather than a universal blueprint. It guides the main research question by helping us ponder the extent to which citizenship education curricula in Tunisia, the UAE, and Lebanon question existing power dynamics, engage with political structures, and imagine alternative futures specific to each of these countries.

Based on Freire's and Illich's critiques of top-down schooling, it is also necessary to include voices from the Arab World who have examined their similar contexts. Freire and Illich's calls for consciousness and de-institutionalizing learning echo in Arab debates over citizenship and education. From authoritarian to sectarian political systems, Arab thinkers have delved into local structures that shape citizenship education. These thinkers illuminate our understanding of the region and its lived realities and show the gap between emancipatory education and political dynamics.

Starting with the transitional and shaky democracy of Tunisia, legal scholar Yadh Ben Achour has led efforts to reconcile cultural identity with democratic citizenship. Having served as the head of the reform commission in 2011, he was a sharp critic of any education policy that serves a monolithic identity. For instance, when an Islamist amendment to the 2014 constitution aimed to make formal education a tool to root youth in their Arab and Islamic identity, Ben Achour labeled it "a disaster". He called for education to be a tool of openness rather than introversion. His stance resonates with Freire, who advocated for broadening critical horizons and embracing multiple identities. Ben Achour also reflects the ongoing schism in Tunisian citizenship education between identity-based and republican-secular content (Elleuch 2020).

Amel Grami, a professor and feminist intellectual, is equally influential in Tunisia. She studies the intersection of gender, religion, and education in the country. She insists that formal changes on the legal level have little effect as long as patriarchal mindsets are unchallenged. She noted that despite Tunisia's new constitution and progressive laws, there remains a gap between discourse and practice due to a "regression within the education sector" that perpetuates gender inequality (Grami in Kalboussi 2014). This shows the way curricula, especially those about citizenship, marginalize women's equal citizenship by reinforcing traditional gender roles. Grami's work helps us see how current practices in citizenship education in Tunisia, sidelining gender justice, are thus undermining an inclusive citizenship. Frami resonates with Illich and his skepticism of formal schooling that will continue to reproduce social hierarchies unless it's reoriented.

Even after the post-2011 progress, the Tunisian experience in citizenship still echoes the legacy of authoritarianism, back when the state tightly controlled narratives to foster passive and loyal citizens. Scholar Larbi Chouikha has documented how state-produced media and textbooks under Bourguiba and Ben Ali's one-party regimes nurtured a passive and neutral political identity (Chouikha 2025). Moreover, intellectuals like Olfa Lamloum researched disenfranchised regions in the Tunisian interior. She showed how youth there are excluded from full citizenship and have to create their own citizenship education through local grassroots initiatives (Lamloum in Challand 2015). This shows that informal citizenship education through arts and community projects always finds its way when formal education fails to empower learners. Finally, we cannot help but mention Aboul Qacem Echebbi's role in shaping Tunisia's civic imagination. His anti-colonial poetry became the revolution's anthem: "If one day the people desired life, fate must obey", which symbolizes efforts of active citizenship and hope since the country's independence.

Moving to Lebanon, the main challenge facing citizenship education and citizenship as a whole is the sectarian political system. The battles over a national History textbook after the civil war exemplify the unresolved struggle for citizenship education. Historian Ahmad Beydoun describes the deeply sectarian nature of writing and teaching history in Lebanon. He noted the absence of a true "work of memory" for reconciliation after the civil war. Attempts to create a shared historical narrative have reproduced the war's divisions through "obfuscation and obliteration" (Beydoun 2012).

Consequently, the curriculum promotes partisan pride and denial while omitting critical reflection of past atrocities and their current fallout. This undermines citizenship education and cultivates a society where students see themselves as inheritors of a sectarian system in which they are either victims or victors, rather than members of a nation that went through a major conflict. This applies to Freire's culture of silence, where Beydoun shows that we need to confront historical facts and injustices, starting with citizenship education, to nurture responsible and informed citizens who feel a sense of belonging to Lebanon.

With little hope of institutional change, intellectuals advanced a counter-narrative to political sectarianism and its reverberation in education. Journalist and historian Samir Kassir foreshadowed the conditions that would later erupt into the Arab Uprisings. He captured the frustration of Arab and Lebanese youth in his landmark essay "Being Arab" in 2004. He described the malaise of being Arab under autocratic regimes and insisted that the only way to escape this stagnation is for Arabs to push for change themselves. His belief that freedom "is a condition of existence" resonates in post-War Lebanon, where youth have repeatedly expressed their frustration with the sectarian system and its resulting corruption, carrying Kassir's legacy that reflects a critical citizenship (Kassir in Rogan 2011). This is Freire's pedagogy of hope that found its way into the streets and is awaiting reaching the classrooms.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a rapidly developing state with strong authority that incorporates curated citizenship education materials to strengthen its grip and advance its values. Among thinkers who have written about authoritarianism, Palestinian scholar Azmi Bishara observes how authoritarian regimes portray citizenship as a privilege granted to subjects in exchange for their loyalty rather than a right. He explains how the rentier authoritarian bargain offers economic welfare and stability in return for political quiescence. Themes of democracy and unity are absent from official discourse and replaced with patriotism, obedience, and loyalty to the homeland (Bishara 2013). Education therefore becomes a tool to enforce this compliance and sideline critical thinking and civic engagement.

In conclusion, incorporating Arab thinkers into the works of Freire and Illich enriches and grounds the critical framework in local realities. This shows the need for citizenship education curricula in our

context to confront repression and singular narratives. The report will further detail how these curricula in each of Tunisia, the UAE, and Lebanon were developed and shaped by their respective political systems and to their service.

2. TUNISIA

2.1. From Revolution to Autocracy: Citizenship Education in Tunisia

Citizenship education in Tunisia was in tandem with the country's political transitions, from authoritarianism to democratic rule after 2011. Historically, President Bourguiba instilled a secular Arab-Muslim identity, and Ben Ali took the same path with a Human Rights façade harnessed to control and foster loyalty to the state and its interests rather than engage students critically (Jules and Barton, 2018). Educated citizens and youth were key participants in the Jasmine Revolution of 2011.

Afterwards, given the schism between the education system at the time and people's democratic aspirations, reforming this sector to promote an active Tunisian citizenship became seminal. A curriculum that prepares citizens to be active in democratic processes must move from rote learning to engaging students in critical thinking vis-à-vis political life (Jules and Barton, 2018).

In this curricular reform, extracurricular activities played an important role in reinforcing civic education through interacting with local institutions, mock elections, and community service projects. The new curriculum incorporated themes of social justice, human rights, and the rule of law. This knowledge, coupled with activities that applied democratic principles, thus bolstered a practical understanding of citizenship and political awareness, and emphasized each citizen's role in promoting these values within a democratic society. However, civics and citizenship education seem to have a low status in the curriculum, with a short instructional time. Another challenge comes from teacher training, which still leans towards direct instruction rather than innovation and community engagement through these revered extracurriculars (Saidi, 2019).

Aside from these structural issues, the Tunisian citizenship education curriculum is yet to fully promote gender equality, especially since inclusive citizenship values are still divisive between secular and conservative groups (Ouanada, 2020).

Despite promising transitions in Tunisia, which many regard as the most successful Arab Uprising, and their auspicious reverberations in education, democracy has recently faced a setback. In October 2024, Kais Saied won a second presidential term by over 90%, but with very low voter turnout and popular protests calling out manipulation, thus considering the election illegitimate. In fact, Saied monopolized the political scene by systematically dismantling post-revolution democratic institutions, rewriting laws to centralize power, and jailing or barring notable opposition figures. Many civil society institutions were excluded from observing these latest elections (Besch & Yerkes, 2024).

This authoritarianism has been coupled with a precarious economic condition. In a paper published by Carnegie Middle East, Diwan, Alaya, and Meddeb (2024) describe the macroeconomic problems Tunisia has been facing, such as instability, inflation, and high debt that were exacerbated under Saied. Although the president has rejected an IMF deal, austerity measures still led to poverty and rising unemployment.

Thirteen years after a promising uprising, Tunisian citizenship is at a crossroads. The regime's restriction of rights is threatening the progress gained from the democratic transition and indicating a rising struggle with citizenship. Despite all this, Tunisians' desire for true democracy and citizenship rights is not quelled; their past efforts and resilience indicate hope in a democratic revival. This dual crisis of political crackdown and economic regression reverts us to the bedrock of civic participation: citizenship education as a means to comprehend, navigate, and challenge these systemic changes. Given the transition then setback in Tunisia, does citizenship education reflect a genuine transition towards democracy or is it merely a veneer? How can this setback be traced to citizenship education?

2.2. The Politics of Education in Tunisia: Between Nation-Building and Exclusion

Education in Tunisia has long reflected the country's dynamic political and social realities, serving as a tool to shape citizenship and national identity. While the country was technically under a

protectorate, French authorities had significant power. During that period, education assimilated Tunisian elites and cultivated their loyalty to the colonial system while suppressing their Tunisian identity. Education, therefore, secured political passivity and social hierarchies (Jules and Barton 2018).

After Tunisia's independence in 1956, its first president, Habib Bourguiba, placed education at the center of nation-building and led major educational reforms that promoted secularism and Arabization within a unified national identity. Tunisian curricula outlined a concept of citizenship intrinsically linked to state loyalty, national unity, and secular modernity. Critical thinking, however, was discouraged, with history programs avoiding advancing democratic engagement and discussing authoritarianism and dissent within Tunisia. Bourguiba emphasized gender equality, with reforms increasing educational opportunities for girls. Compulsory and free primary education for boys and girls was promoted under the "Code du Statut Personnel" as a cornerstone in the modernization plan.

Gender equality aimed to advance a secular image of educated Tunisian women who participate in society. However, these measures marginalized religious and rural women by banning the niqab and hijab in schools and public offices (Jules and Barton 2018). Gender-focused policies were also curtailed by structural problems like inadequate educational infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and teacher shortages. While access to education did improve, inequalities and disparities in educational quality increased, thus eroding gender equality in education and consequently inclusive citizenship (Manzi 2019).

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime continued to promote gender equality, presenting Tunisia as a leader in gender reform within the region, and advancing modernization and digital literacy. These efforts aimed at projecting a democratic facade while fastening authoritarian control. Similarly, citizenship education remained systematically avoidant of political realities and critical engagement of learners, promoting abstract rights and duties and silencing dissent (Rozen 2015; Jules and Barton 2018).

The Jasmine Revolution of 2011 shed light on the deep schism between formal education and meaningful citizenship. Educated youth protested their frustration with political exclusion and limited opportunities, raising demands for freedom and socio-economic justice. Women played an important role in the protests, speaking out against gender inequality in society and education, sparking hopes for the latter to promote participatory citizenship. The new 2014 Constitution drafted after the ousting of President Ben Ali in 2011 reaffirmed the right to education and gender equality. However, political instability and regional disparities stemming from centralized governance stifled these reforms. Educated women in Tunisia, especially in marginalized regions, still suffer from high unemployment rates, which underscores the pressing challenge of linking education to economic and political opportunities. Despite these challenges of linking education to lived realities, scholars insist on holistic educational reforms that address socioeconomic inequalities and civic engagement under broader government overhauls to consolidate the country's democracy (Manzi 2019; Jules and Barton 2018).

Despite the aforementioned hurdles, Tunisia's democratic transition remains a continuous learning process where citizens construct and refine citizenship through political commitment, participation in elections, and civic engagement. In this process, the pre-2011 phase was marked by efforts to institutionalize democratic norms, and the post-2011 phase saw legal reforms to reinforce these norms (Nachi 2016).

2.3. Civics and History in Tunisia's Struggle for Citizenship

Civics and History constitute the two pillars of citizenship education in Tunisia. The first has been a statutory subject since 1991. The Tunisian curriculum of civics aims to cultivate knowledge of rights and duties in learners, address challenges in society like violence, and advance gender equality (Fundación Ideaborn 2020). Civic education has a fringe role in the program of studies, as it is allocated only one hour per week in contrast with three to five hours for other subjects and assigned the lowest coefficient in high school courses (Saidi 2019). On the other hand, the History curriculum was last amended before the revolution of 2011 and is mostly the same, with an addition

of the 2011 revolution and the 2014 Constitution. The political instability and economic crises have not yet been addressed.

2.4. Democratic Rhetoric, Authoritarian Pedagogy: Critique of the Tunisian Citizenship Education Curriculum

Despite the increasing importance accorded to citizenship education after the Jasmine Revolution, it is still falling short of democratic engagement for learners. For starters, systemic problems like overcrowded classrooms, the persistence and predominance of rote learning, and inadequate teacher training plague citizenship education and curtail opportunities for genuine democracy (Fundación Ideaborn 2020). Moreover, the prevalence of theoretical knowledge over practical applications hinders participatory skills and critical thinking in civics, disconnecting learners from actively engaging in real-life democratic practices within public life (Rozen 2015). This issue is more salient in rural regions like Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, which were the birthplaces of the 2011 revolution. Citizenship education is not only marginalized in the country but also overshadowed by urgent problems like inadequate infrastructure, low teacher retention, and socioeconomic disenfranchisement. In contrast, schools in urban areas like the capital and Sfax are in a relatively better condition and more likely to pilot internationally backed initiatives like the "Forming Responsible Citizens" project discussed throughout this section.

Despite these structural gaps, many promising efforts have been implemented in Tunisia. One of the biggest initiatives was the Forming Responsible Citizens (FRC) program developed by Fundación Ideaborn and supported by the Union for the Mediterranean. It piloted a civic education initiative in the country, facilitating the integration of theoretical knowledge into real-world democratic participation. FRC involved three components: teacher training, curriculum improvement and enrichment, and student-led civic projects. Training workshops helped educators integrate themes like democracy, environmental protection, and gender equality into class instruction. Students designed and implemented community initiatives based on these themes. The program assessment indicated that FRC enhanced student engagement through practical approaches and deepened their understanding of civic life. Challenges, however, persist. The program's implementation was uneven between rural and urban schools. Moreover, limited institutional stress the importance of formal policy backing and the need to scale up these initiatives.

Civil society initiatives like the FRC are important efforts towards solid citizenship education, but they remain limited and have not led to fundamental change in the curriculum's institutional gaps. To delve deeper into the curriculum's content, Drissi describes a lack of coherent conceptualization of "good citizens" and their roles in democracy. This curriculum does not tackle religious diversity, gender equality, or minority rights, which perpetuates the status quo and exacerbates divisions (Drissi 2014). This abstraction of citizenship principles away from practical applications undermines learners' critical thinking, which is conversely stated in the curriculum's objectives and their ability to probe their political milieu (Rozen 2015). Furthermore, there is a gap between contemporary events and civic education, notably the 2022 crackdown on civil society organizations, even though these topics dominated public discourse in the country. Abid (2024, p. 15) notes this acknowledgement of citizenship in a static way that neglects contemporary issues and political realities.

Civics textbooks contain references to gender equality while simultaneously depicting stereotypes about women who are not represented in leadership roles (Fundación Ideaborn 2020). Broadly speaking, gender reforms are not adequately integrated into pedagogical strategies and practices. This gap between the progressive policy advanced and its meager implementation perpetuates traditional gender norms and sidelines women from realizing their full potential as equal citizens. Girls do not learn tools to scrutinize the status quo and usher societal transformation. Fundación Ideaborn (2020) diagnostic study mentions teachers' refusal to tackle women's rights and gender issues in detail for fear of community backlash. Such topics are vaguely addressed or even ignored, especially in remote and conservative areas of the country.

The discrepancies between policy intentions and actual implementation of Tunisia's citizenship curriculum are not restricted to gender equality. The entire system relies on content-dense, centralized approaches that prioritize content knowledge over problem-solving and critical analysis, which leaves learners ill-prepared to stand up to authoritarianism and demand reforms. Furthermore, power dynamics and governance structures are not addressed adequately. For instance, while students learn about Human Rights and Freedom in civic education, they do not receive practical knowledge to engage with these concepts in real life (Abid 2024, p. 15).

Applications consist of simple information-transfer and gap-filling exercises with minimal work on critical reflection (Abid 2024, p. 19). In addition to the underdeveloped behavioral scope and its skills, Abid (2024) points out a similarly deficient socio-emotional domain with values like empathy, global belonging, and solidarity. Students therefore struggle to internalize such essential values to build a democratic society.

The second pillar of citizenship education in Tunisia also lacks critical reflection and is disconnected from the country's political reality on the road to a full democratic transition. Learners are not shown ways to connect historical events and relate them to current challenges (Rozen 2015; Abid 2024). Recent authoritarian developments under Saied that defined Tunisia's political landscape and are the root causes of the current political issues are excluded from classroom discussions.

National narratives are overemphasized at the expense of global perspectives of which they are part. For example, students learn about French colonialism, the struggle for independence, and national identity without placing these events in the broader global context of decolonization, imperialism, and human rights, nor linking them to current systemic socioeconomic problems in Tunisia.

Rote learning also plagues history education, when learners are asked to extract information about the contributions of Arabs and Muslims to civilizations instead of critically assessing narratives and biases. However, activities encouraging higher levels of thinking still exist, such as analyzing Al-Idrissi's map and projecting it against modern ones, yet they remain sporadic and not enough to foster rigorous critical thinking or draw interdisciplinary connections.

Most applications remain individual, with little collaboration, project-based learning, debate, or role play. National achievements with the latest democratic transition of the country are studied without giving the students a chance to critically reflect on them with their past lessons and current setbacks like the recent authoritarian resurgence.

Finally, and similar to civic education, history suffers from the same deficiency in socio-emotional and behavioral skills that can allow learners to act upon issues of historical injustices and participate in related civic initiatives (Abid 2024). The most prominent example is the Berbers (Amazigh) in Tunisia.

While they are acknowledged as the indigenous people of the Maghreb, their representation is rather superficial and restricted to historical narratives without addressing current debates about Amazigh language revitalization and their political inclusion in Tunisia. For example, debates concerning Amazigh identity resurfaced in Tunisia after local municipalities from the South of the country vainly called for official recognition of Amazigh New Year Celebrations.

More broadly, the Amazigh language is neither recognized as an official language nor included in schools (Minority Rights Group International 2022). This mere factual knowledge of the Amazigh tokenizes them instead of treating them as a living culture that is facing challenges and is an essential part of the country and the region's pluralistic heritage (Abid 2024).

The system in Tunisia is still largely centralized and led by inspectors, which favors conformity over innovation. Teacher training programs focus on technical and evaluative skills at the expense of creative pedagogy and extracurricular activities. Consequently, learners do not get the chance to engage in community projects and government simulations that hone their democratic competencies as citizens (Rozen 2015).

In addition to the aforementioned problems, political instability has taken a toll on Education in Tunisia. Political crises that result in fluctuating government priorities and policy reversals have disrupted efforts toward democratic education in the country. With economic crises, governments focus on their short-term survival, thus diverting resources away from the education sector and its reforms, which become deprioritized (Manzi 2019). This was evident in the repeated delays that affected the committee charged with preparing new modules in civics education (Fundación Ideaborn 2020). The political instability and institutional vacuum in 2021 have paralyzed ministries and halted reforms like those in education (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies 2021). This political precariousness continues to obstruct educational reforms, notably in citizenship education that is the foundation for lasting democratic change and reduces it to a veneer rather than a catalyst for change.

2.5. Transitional Justice and Citizenship Education in Tunisia

The aforementioned limitations of citizenship education in Tunisia reflect those of transitional justice mechanisms, especially in their sidelining of youth political engagement and marginalized voices like minorities. As shown above, both civics and history curricula fall short of addressing contemporary political issues and systemic inequalities. Similarly, transitional justice processes have struggled to account for structural foundations of the past's injustices.

Transitional justice aims to address the consequences of human rights violations through reparations, truth commissions, and reforms. It seeks to uncover the truth and promote accountability to reach reconciliation and societal healing. Jmal and Ladisch (2022) argue that transitional justice fails to reach beyond the legal frameworks of victims and perpetrators and ignores systemic inequalities and the beneficiaries of oppression. Effective transitional justice must involve all factions of society, like marginalized communities, bystanders, and, most importantly, the youth.

In Tunisia, youth catalyzed the 2011 revolution, raising demands of dignity, reforms, and freedom. Yet after the revolution, they were sidelined from transitional justice processes like the Truth and Dignity Commission. This mirrors the exclusion of youth from shaping the citizenship education they receive, which is top-down and disconnected from their experiences, realities on the ground, and aspirations to partake in transitional justice. Alternatively, and to keep revolutionary demands alive, many young Tunisians turned to digital platforms and artistic activism (artivism). Critical podcasts, rap songs, and online movements like "The Wrong Generation" collected personal testimonies and challenged state-controlled narratives. The generational turn to such informal platforms as an alternative means of civic engagement reflects the distrust of the state's proposed way of citizenship through its official curricula.

The gap between transitional justice at the state level and youth activism therefore resembles, in many ways, citizenship education in Tunisia that relies on abstract notions without offering learners the opportunity to engage with them. Both embody a tokenistic inclusion. Education in underprivileged regions like Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid is relatively underfunded, just like transitional justice neglected inequalities that led to the revolution. More importantly, alienated and frustrated youth who resorted to alternative ways of expression created informal material on citizenship education that challenged the stagnating status quo in formal citizenship education described above.

This is not a mere reflection of the state's failure to include youth in transitional justice but also a response to the curriculum's failure to engage with the political realities of students after the revolution. Both transitional justice and citizenship education need reforms that address systemic exclusions and incorporate youth participation. The innovative and impactful role the youth have played should make them stakeholders in drafting new curricula by similarly incorporating firsthand accounts of history and activism through digital strategies in addition to transitional justice strategies themselves.

2.6. Proposed Curricular and Pedagogical Reforms for Citizenship Education in Tunisia

Reforms in Tunisia's citizenship education curriculum require updating its content to reflect the country's socio-political transformations and the values and injustices that were behind this transformation. Given the current authoritarian turn in Tunisia, such reforms are unlikely to be led by the state. All eyes are on civil society organizations, independent educators, and grassroots initiatives in hopes of promoting alternative civic learning spaces and producing critical narratives that document Tunisia's history *en route* to democracy. Starting by incorporating women's roles and youth activism for an inclusive and relevant education that represents different perspectives and showcases women in different leadership roles to make sure students encounter equitable gender representation in civic life away from gender stereotypes (Fundación Ideaborn 2020).

Another key area of curricular reforms in citizenship education's content is addressing Tunisia's pluralism through a balance of republican ideals of national unity and liberal values of diversity and

individual rights. Furthermore, these values should be addressed from a national and transnational lens that begins with the students' surroundings and moves to global struggles for justice (Nachi 2016).

On the pedagogical level, diversifying civic education resources to include project-based opportunities like field visits to public and non-governmental institutions, coupled with additional instructional time and credit, would bolster civic responsibility in learners through problem-solving (Fundación Ideaborn 2020; Saidi 2019). Interactive activities can include mock elections, volunteering projects, and political simulations. Students of all ages can benefit from appropriate collaborative projects revolving around real-life political, economic, and social problems to strengthen their critical thinking and teamwork while experimenting with democratic governance through school councils (Saidi 2019). Dialogical learning and practice-oriented pedagogy can complement this balance (Drissi 2014).

All these reforms should be accompanied by teacher training to enhance their capabilities as facilitators in critical discussions and student-led projects. A macro-approach allowing teachers to devise their own professional development plans per their needs and those of their classrooms will reduce the centralization and reliance on inspectors (Saidi 2019). In fact, teachers have not been idle while Tunisia was going through the revolution. Rozen (2015) talks about "mechanics of suspicion" to challenge singular narratives in History education. They have paradoxically used outdated textbooks to critique and expose the shortcomings of authoritarian narratives while fostering critical thinking in their students. Teachers can also collaborate with NGOs to enhance extracurricular activities like clubs and community projects.

Reforming citizenship education means acknowledging its wide overarching scope beyond its two allocated subjects. Project-based learning that naturally spans across disciplines requires the collaboration of different teachers. When it comes to assessment and evaluation, tools that move beyond mere rote knowledge outcomes to skill- and behavior-based assessment, such as evaluating civic engagement, track students' critical thinking and empathy. Finally, informal education like artivism and digital activism should be supported and recognized as an essential complement to formal citizenship education.

Citizenship education is the key to sustaining and improving Tunisia's democratic transition, which is built upon citizens who know, actively exercise, and defend their civil and political rights, and who are nurtured and practice these rights from an early age.

3. UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

What does it mean to teach citizenship in a country where nearly 90% of the population is non-citizen? State-led narratives dominate the diverse educational space in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This approach to education serves the emirates' political system, where welfare and stability substitute for political participation. Following this pattern, citizenship education in the UAE calls for national Emirati pride, social responsibility, and loyalty to the state. These themes are most clearly pronounced in the UAE's Moral Education Program (MEP), which advances tolerance, participation in the community, and respect for the local culture.

This program focuses on generic social values and does not engage learners in debates on democratic processes and governance, the foundations of active and informed citizenship. It aims to foster an identity through mostly "apolitical" programs that avoid political and civic issues (Amin, Zaman, & Tok, 2023). Students do not engage with their potential roles in governance shaping society; they are restricted to valuing their culture (Al-Qatawneh, Alsalhi, and Eltahir, 2019). Moreover, a significant gap in the MEP, as described by Razem (2020), is its focus on unity rather than diversity despite the UAE being multicultural. The curriculum emphasizes social cohesion and harmony without tapping into the diversity and complexity of perspectives. This nurtures an "us vs. them" narrative between Emiratis and the majority of immigrants residing in the UAE.

In a broader context, Waghid and Davids (2014) argue that authoritarian regimes in many Arab states, including the Gulf states, are inherently resistant to a democratic citizenship education. As an alternative, the authors suggest a "pluralist imaginary of citizenship" and "pedagogy of encounters" whereby respect and empathy are fostered regardless of allegiance to regimes. Moreover, dialogue and interaction in diverse milieus expose students to new ideas.

This section delves into the UAE's citizenship education curriculum and the ways it prioritizes national loyalty and preserves state authority at the expense of critical civic skills. It seeks to elucidate this symbiotic relationship between said curriculum and the country's political system, which reflects the authoritarian bargain. By pedagogically analyzing themes of unity and exclusion, the following parts will trace how these educational choices reinforce the status quo and limit democratic prospects.

3.1. History of the UAE

The United Arab Emirates has been shaped by an intricate triad of tribal governance, colonial influence, and economic transformations. Before unification, the region was made up of tribal sheikhdoms governed by local leaders who formed alliances and social contracts to maintain their power. These foundational structures ingrained political authority in family lineage and kinship, which created a hierarchical and personalized conception of citizenship based on loyalty over rights.

Britain established treaties and protectorates in the 19th and early 20th centuries to secure maritime stability and trade. This arrangement limited the political authority of tribal leaders (Heard-Bey 2005). The colonial period was characterized by external control and reinforced centralized rule through indirect governance, which led to a political climate that favored compliance rather than pluralistic citizenship.

In the mid-20th century, the discovery of oil caused sweeping political and economic transformations in the region, with its revenues pushing leaders to demand more autonomy, which ultimately ended British colonial influence. The UAE federation was officially established in 1971 with a federal authority balancing between the centralized authority and the regional autonomy of each of the seven emirates under a federal constitution (Heard-Bey 2005). This oil wealth gave way to an authoritarian social contract: citizenship became linked to access to state-distributed welfare and benefits at the expense of participation in political life.

The political system in the UAE blends tribal governance and modern federal structures with a hereditary ruler (emir) at the head of each emirate. The system is authoritarian, with neither democratic institutions nor political participation. The hereditary leadership seeks to maintain control and stability over political pluralism. Tribal and patriarchal frameworks still exist under the guise of federalism, which curtails political engagement and thus builds citizenship education around obedience.

The UAE has striven to maintain a delicate balance between modernization, state-building propelled by the oil boom, and forming a national identity in the young country. Challenges are multiple: demographic changes and sustainable development on one hand, and global economic shifts on the other, all while preserving the national identity and heritage. UAE leadership has embraced tribal loyalties that remained strong despite grand modernization projects.

Under globalization and a historical welfare rentier economy, the Emirati state is redefining its social contract around active citizenship. "Vision 2021" places work at the core of citizenship with the aim of developing citizens who are entrepreneurial, patriotic, and civic-minded, thus ready for a globalized world. Liberal initiatives like the Golden Visa and reforms promoting tolerance position the UAE as a progressive, business-friendly country, simultaneously boosting its global reputation and national identity (Alexander and Mazzucco 2021). Despite these efforts, conservative traditional Bedouin heritage diverges from the tolerant and multicultural image. The latter remains marginalized, with migrants disenfranchised despite playing a quintessential role in the country's development for generations (Alexander and Mazzucco 2021).

Another important faction to consider when addressing citizenship in the UAE is younger Emiratis. Having grown up in a globalized and digital country, they do not quite relate to the state's portrayal of a Bedouin past. Their expressions of identity are dynamic and rather adaptive to socioeconomic and cultural shifts in the UAE (Alexander and Mazzucco 2021). This generational gap highlights the tension between top-down citizenship narratives and bottom-up realities, challenging state-directed citizenship education.

As a result of past tribal fragmentations, the recent formation of a state, colonial influence, authoritarianism, rapid globalization and economic growth, multiculturalism and its marginalization, there is a lack of shared historical narrative of Emirati identity. Citizenship in this country remains a work in progress, with the state "project-izing" an identity through modern symbols of national pride like opulent spectacles and events (Alexander and Mazzucco 2021). Understanding this history is foundational to analyzing the UAE's citizenship education curriculum today: it is certainly not neutral, but a purposeful result of the country's history that prioritizes political loyalty and economic welfare over political engagement and education.

3.2. History of Education in the UAE

The evolution of education in the UAE naturally reflected the country's history from tribal to modern and centralized governance within a state. Education underwent significant transformations from informal religious education to modern and systemic education. Starting with Kuttab schools centered around Mutawas (religious scholars) who taught Quran, Islamic values, and basic literacy, typically within mosques or homes.

Educational circles gradually emerged and included mathematics and history. By the mid-20th century, merchants from the region, notably Kuwait, established schools that promoted Islamic values and an Arab identity (Ali et al., 2018). After the discovery of oil and the formation of the federation in 1971, the state prioritized education by introducing free and compulsory schooling in newly established schools across the Emirates. Curricula initially modeled neighboring countries but were later adapted to reflect Emirati values. Until these days, reforms have focused on innovation and technology following global standards under initiatives like Vision 2020 (Ali et al., 2018).

Education is intrinsically linked to economic growth, social stability, and innovation— pillars of the UAE's national development strategy, in addition to long-term goals like economic diversification, global competitiveness, and tolerance. Articles 26 and 30 of the UAE Constitution highlight the responsibility of the state to provide education and foster a skilled workforce for economic modernization (United Arab Emirates n.d.).

To cater to these goals and economic demands, the state launched initiatives like "Vision 2021" and the "Mohammed Bin Rashid Smart Learning Initiative" to advance STEM education, critical thinking, and lifelong learning (Mahmoud 2022). Under these initiatives, educational institutions partner with the private sector to prepare students for a dynamic job market.

The numerous private and international schools play a major role in supporting the country's diverse population by offering quality curricula, thus enhancing competition and innovation in the education sector (David 2017). The shift from an informal and community-based education to a state-driven

globalized system reflects how the UAE harnessed education for economic development as well as a tool to centralize authority based on a cohesive national narrative in a rapidly transforming world.

3.3. Managing Citizens in a Global Classroom: Sustainability and Global Citizenship in the Emirati Context

As the UAE is shifting from a rentier economy to a knowledge-based society, it is harnessing education to shape a revamped form of citizenship that serves and aligns with this transformation. The Emirates seeks to advance values like sustainability and tolerance on a globalized scale anchored in national moral values. Furthermore, important global shifts cannot be ignored here; with the UAE deepening its engagement with Artificial Intelligence and technological partnerships, its role as a regional hub for innovation is exponentially growing.

Simultaneously, the ongoing war between Israel and Iran is reshaping the Middle East and introducing new geopolitical challenges. In this uncertain landscape, citizenship education in the UAE plays a seminal role in preparing the youth to engage with technological leadership and stability. The following section will examine citizenship education in the UAE through its Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Global Citizenship Education (GCED), and Moral Education Program (MEP). It will delve into the multiple ways these programs instill different values and converge to instill a managed citizenship stripped of political agency.

Under the national strategy to diversify the economy and move from oil-based to a knowledge-driven society, the UAE devised “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD) and “Global Citizenship Education” (GCED) that align with global sustainability goals (Amin et al. 2023). While these frameworks appear to be a participatory learning approach, they are still anchored within a controlled educational environment that selectively decides the type of citizenship cultivated in learners.

ESD addresses the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through incorporating economic, social, and environmental justice into learning. ESD theoretically fosters critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, and creativity across all levels of education (Amin, Zaman, and Tok, 2023), but practically reinforces broader state narratives. Key ESD components include green schools through sustainable practices and infrastructure, green education by incorporating sustainability into the curriculum, green capacity building in training educators for teaching about sustainability, and green communities whereby students participate in community projects (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education 2025). Although ambitious, such initiatives still brush the surface of problems like sustainability as long as they don’t critically engage the systemic roots of social inequality and environmental degradation.

In fact, ESD faces multiple challenges, such as the disconnection between national policies on sustainability and their practical implementation in schools through effective pedagogical strategies. Other challenges include disparities between public and private schools, where ESD is more emphasized for students of the former, and gender disparities. Moreover, many schools grapple with straining academic demands and limited resources, which affect their ability to prioritize ESD (Amin, Zaman, and Tok, 2023). Emirati schools are consequently expected to champion sustainability without adequate space and time in the curriculum, as well as funding, to meaningfully embed ESD and its themes. Therefore, ESD is more of a top-down policy than a grassroots educational transformation.

Global Citizenship Education (GCED), in parallel, aims to promote sustainable development through fostering global awareness, tolerance, and social responsibility in learners while preserving an Emirati identity. This reflects the state’s mandate of progressive globalization while preserving a curated national culture. GCED advances critical thinking and collaboration through academic and hands-on activities that connect students to the real world and its challenges (Amin, Zaman, and Tok, 2023; Wren, 2021).

Students participate in debates and problem-based learning while reflecting on the process en route to understanding global interconnectedness, thus fostering global citizenship. Despite the promising potential of GCED, many obstacles face its efficient implementation. Its limited integration

across the curriculum, whereby preference is given to theoretical instruction as well as short interventions that may not yield desired outcomes, compounds the over-reliance on Western models that are not necessarily relevant to the UAE. Similarly, volunteer programs do not offer the critical reflection for students to address the real underlying problems (Wren 2021).

Wren elaborates that these programs do not use academic and civic pedagogy that allows learners to analyze systemic issues at the origin of the problems, such as critical reflections, debates, and dialogue. Students volunteering end up doing charity and goodwill without understanding core issues like social structures and privilege, thus finding a sustainable solution. Therefore, volunteerism through GCED programs in the UAE does not translate into meaningful, far-reaching civic engagement.

For example, when helping domestic workers, people with disabilities, or any underprivileged group, students' reflection mostly revolved around gratitude, sympathy, and satisfaction from volunteering, rather than an analysis of the root causes of inequality and structural factors like labor laws, policies, and attitudes. Wren (2021) attributes this gap to the absence of dialogic and critical pedagogies that stimulate students to develop a deeper analysis of their volunteering, which becomes a mere charitable gesture ruptured from its political and civic roots.

Ultimately, citizenship education in the UAE, through its ESD and GCED programs, reveals a structural dichotomy between its stated goal to promote an active and globally aware citizenry and the pedagogical and political constraints on critical thought and political agency. This "managed citizenship" model socializes learners to adopt favorable values like tolerance, volunteerism, and sustainability without the political tools or space to challenge the systems that produce the problems they are tackling. Therefore, while GCED and ESD programs in the UAE reflect a progressive rhetoric, their implementation in classrooms is reproducing depoliticized citizenship that reinforces the authoritarian bargain in the country.

3.4. From Global Goals to Local Loyalties: Moral Education and the Limits of Citizenship in the UAE

While both GCED and ESD programs target global social awareness in learners, they are placed within an economic-developmental framework. The Moral Education Program (MEP) was introduced to offer a more domestically grounded endeavor to shape and instill values across the UAE. How does the Emirates' curriculum that teaches empathy and responsibility function in the heart of a political system that hinders political agency? This question is at the heart of the UAE's MEP, which is the moral and ethical foundation of apolitical citizenship education in the UAE discussed in this section.

MEP in the UAE was established as a response to the demographic shift where nationals make up 15% of the population. This comprehensive initiative aims to cultivate shared ethical values and social cohesion in this diverse society (Pring 2019). Universal values like respect, responsibility, and empathy are taught to local and expatriate students within each textbook.

This spiral curriculum across grades and subjects allows learners to engage with these universal values through everyday scenarios. For instance, grade one students learn empathy, kindness, and inclusion through a story about welcoming a new Chinese classmate. Subsequently, learners engage with more complex issues; in grade six, students discuss distributive justice through university scholarships for all, irrespective of race, nationality, and gender. Grade eight students analyze Martin Luther King Jr.'s activism and legacy to learn about civil rights, equality, and discrimination. Other values include conflict resolution strategies like compromise and collaboration. As students advance, they engage with more complex global issues like climate change, international relations between the UAE and other countries, as well as global institutions.

Grade eleven students examine gender inequality through case studies of influential women and the Global Gender Gap Report (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education 2018). Related activities across the curriculum prompt students to analyze social issues, reflect on them, and create action plans that contribute to the UAE's transition to a knowledge economy (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education 2020–2021). The MEP is well in line with the UN and OECD's global citizenship education, whose aims are to develop students capable of understanding global issues and engaging with diverse people (OECD 2022).

Moral Education is taught through a weekly period in all schools across subjects like science, social studies, and literature. Direct exercises include environmental campaigns, honesty boxes, social projects, and student council. Across all these activities, teachers promote moral deliberation by facilitating evidence-based discussions and making sure students develop their own views and opinions to foster critical thinking and open-mindedness. Aside from teachers' crucial role in implementing a successful MEP, caregivers are strongly encouraged to participate (Pring 2019).

Despite this progressive outlook, references to political rights and democratic participation are still limited. Citizenship education is designed to serve the authoritarian bargain. Green (2022) critiques the MEP in the UAE as driven by neoliberalism, which imposes a market-driven approach to every aspect of life, including education. The UAE has indeed inspired its curricula from England's neoliberal reforms in the 1980s. With a system that revolves around competition, measurable outcomes, and accountability, the MEP has consequently become a statutory subject that is formally assessed and mostly separate from other disciplines within the curriculum.

This neoliberal approach to moral education undermines its quality and authenticity by stressing testing, ranking, and compartmentalization over soft skills. This logic of compartmentalization has dominated the holistic mission and values of education. Green places his argument within a global neoliberal trend in education that replaced citizenship education and the social contract with control, surveillance, and measured outcomes in international rankings like TIMSS and PISA at the expense of holistic development that is harder to quantify. This desired competition has penetrated the curriculum itself, which is now congested with subjects jostling for time. The dominance of metrics and quantifiable outcomes pressures teachers to focus on assessment and grades rather than moral and ethical education through the MEP.

In probing the assessment of MEP in UAE schools, several implementation challenges arise. Although schools have the option to either integrate Moral Education throughout the curriculum or teach it as a separate subject. Although this discipline seems inherently interdisciplinary, most teachers still prefer the latter to prevent its dilution, which ironically makes it more theoretical and isolated.

Assessing this subject remains difficult, nevertheless. Social skills cannot be concretely measured, nor is there a standardized tool to evaluate students' acquisition of moral values. Although portfolios and checklists exist, they often lack clear criteria (Abdul Hadi and Hill, 2024). Moreover, the UAE's multicultural society challenges the MEP, with teachers required to factor in cultural and religious sensitivities to respect students' varied backgrounds while nurturing critical thinking (Abdul Hadi and Hill, 2024).

To address these issues, Green (2022) calls for abandoning rigid neoliberal metrics that fail to capture the nuances and intricacies of moral education and adopting a more holistic and integrated approach. However, this call clashes with the country's political system, where power is centralized and dissent is repressed. Ultimately, educational reforms that may challenge the status quo in any way are also constrained within these tight systemic boundaries.

The most salient problem with citizenship education in the UAE, whether in ESD, GCED, or MEP, is a complete oversight of political education–the foundation of active citizenship. Without discussions on civic engagement and political processes starting with the national level, then moving to the international scene, the social virtues of the MEP cannot be properly instilled. The apolitical approach curtails learners' will and ability to advocate and act for a just and moral world (Green 2022). Debates on power and inequality are discouraged, and students comply instead of being critical of the status quo and ways to change it, thus solving the problems they study from their origins instead of palliative measures. To illustrate the above, Al-Qatawneh et al. (2019) analyzed Arabic language textbooks from grades 6 to 9 and found that values like responsibility, loyalty to the homeland, cooperation, and respect for traditions were the most recurrent, while human rights and participation in civil society were significantly less frequent or even absent. This consolidates the status of citizenship education as a crucial tool to instill social cohesion but not political transformation.

As global issues become more intricate, addressing them in the classroom necessitates an understanding of governance and civic responsibility. Climate change cannot be grasped without learning about governments' and multinationals' actions and their underlying causes to advocate for better climate policies and hold leaders accountable. This disregard for political education is a direct consequence of political inaccessibility and non-democratic structures in this country, where

decision-making stems from a handful of elites who fashion citizenship education to maintain stability and suppress any dissent that might challenge the status quo.

Finally, and to add to the aforementioned critique, citizenship education aims to foster social cohesion and a national identity. All schools across the UAE are required to display symbols of the country's national identity like flags, historical accomplishments, and portraits of leaders. This nurtures a form of passive nationalism among learners who learn the narratives defined by the government. This reflects the authoritarian bargain in the country whereby the state cultivates loyalty in exchange for silence and political lack of involvement. International students are also integrated into the national discourse but only when it comes to cultural assimilation, and not political inclusion (Nazir 2024).

All this begs the question: Can we teach global citizenship education without properly addressing citizenship at the national level first? A major flaw of the global citizenship education program in the UAE is assuming that students can be prepared to become global citizens without having developed a strong sense of national citizenship, which we proved missing in the course of the report. Despite promoting global competencies like ICT skills and attempts at cross-cultural communication, it neglects national political engagement that is the blueprint of engaging in global citizenship, often requiring the same sets of skills but on a wider and more intricate level. Without a strong national foundation that grounds learners in their rights as citizens, programs to shape global citizens risk being superficial and disconnected from actual civic empowerment.

4. LEBANON

4.1. Citizenship Education in Lebanon

Almost every piece of literature emphasizes the inextricable link between education and peacebuilding in Lebanon, especially in the post-civil war context. International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) have invested in large-scale studies and supported curricular reforms. In a UNICEF report, Novelli and Smith (2011) acknowledge the role of education in providing psychosocial support to children, as well as fostering social cohesion through tolerance, coexistence, and conflict resolution. While this report focuses on the broader role of education in peacebuilding, it does not even mention citizenship education as a tool to build this elusive peace.

For a country grappling with a sectarian political system and a crisis of national identity, citizenship education entailing national History and civics seems to be the medium through which these problems can be first addressed rather than systematically suppressed in favor of sectarian agendas. Citizenship education is thus not just a pedagogical tool but a political necessity. This is not to downplay the role of generic peace education as advanced by international organizations, but to reaffirm the central role of citizenship, whose absence has historically perpetuated conflicts of all kinds under the guise of sectarian loyalties.

A failure to address citizenship education as a natural form of political education seems to be an enduring problem in INGO reports prioritizing apoliticism over addressing structural political issues underpinning conflicts. In a politically sectarian country like Lebanon, a constructive education must tackle the political structure, historical events like wars and collapses, and their key players. Avoiding these discussions renders concepts like peacebuilding and reconciliation abstract with no real-life translation. Therefore, this section addresses a central question as to the ways citizenship education in Lebanon is (or is not) responding to recent national and regional political developments.

A natural question that follows is the role formal and informal education can play in shaping students' civic engagement within the constraints of the sectarian political system. An optimal peace education calls for a political citizenship education centered around the Lebanese experience with all its nuances and debates, rather than an externally imposed neoliberal framework. This is quintessential in the aftermath of the Israeli war simultaneously ravaging Lebanon and eroding the remnants of cohesion.

In contrast with generic reports, and moving to authentic Lebanese experiences, Frayha (2012) reflects on his time as the head of the Lebanese "Educational Center for Research and Development" (ECRD) from 1999 to 2002 – a period marked by efforts to develop a new curriculum that addresses reconciliation after the civil war and the Taef Agreement. New textbooks, teacher training, research, and multiple projects took place in an apparent educational overhaul called the "Education Awakening Plan".

After affirming the pivotal role of education in fostering a national identity, Frayha argues that the Lebanese educational system reflects its sectarian schisms and has been, just like them, historically fragmented. He clearly states that reform endeavors like the one during his tenure have been systematically halted on account of political and sectarian interests. As a result, efforts to articulate a unified citizenship curriculum have been stalled, depriving students in Lebanon of a standardized curriculum critically addressing their identities, history, and civic responsibilities, making them unprepared to partake in debates concerning their country's future. This comes at an even higher price during periods of economic crises and wars, risking perpetuation and reaffirming this research's objectives.

Frayha emphasizes History education through a unified History curriculum as one of the most fundamental parts of citizenship education. This indicates a deeper problem: any meaningful citizenship education reform cannot happen without a parallel transformation of the country's political system that vetoes every effort to challenge it.

Following Frayha's article focusing on the intentional political stalling of citizenship-based educational reform, Baytiyeh (2017) provides insights into the ways this system, years later, reinforces these sectarian divides. She states that its civic education component is inadequate to

address issues of national identity and human rights, not to mention the ways the national curriculum still perpetuates sectarian indoctrination.

While both Frayha and Baytiyeh's articles emphasize the political nature of the educational system's shortcomings, both authors still fall short of advocating for a political curriculum that can improve the status of citizenship education. For instance, while Frayha explicitly calls out the minister of education for halting the ECRD's reform plan, we still need to place such statements in the broader context of the sectarian political system. This system led to the current multifaceted crisis, which makes obstructing a new curriculum in the best interest of the ruling elites.

Calling for generic reforms rather than envisioning an assertive and practical plan to reform the curriculum within the actual political scene is critical, and best done by involving the stakeholders, mainly learners, whose role is limited to passive learners. Students who are minors are always erroneously seen as "future citizens", waiting to somehow transform into fully-fledged citizens. Within the current disillusionment, we cannot but ponder the role of informal citizenship education and its potential to either compensate for or complement its lacking formal counterpart.

Pillars of citizenship education in Lebanon include history and civics education. The competing interests of the ruling elite translate into multiple nationalist ideologies and sectarian divisions. When it comes to history education, Akar and Albrecht (2017) emphasize how the Lebanese history curriculum promotes a single narrative in the Arabic language that inhibits multiple perspectives and discourages critical thinking while also sidelining students outside of the Lebanese program. This hinders political engagement and civic responsibility.

Moreover, Fadlallah and Janmaat (2024) describe how the history curriculum confuses the Lebanese national identity through sectarian schools emphasizing their sectarian identity and promoting certain historical narratives. Therefore, and in the absence of a unified national History curriculum, allegiance belongs to certain political clans and their affiliated sectarian clergy rather than to a nation. These insights reinforce the need for a history curriculum that nurtures political agency and critical thinking within the country's pluralistic context, rather than dogmatic loyalty.

Furthermore, and with rising fears of internal strife, new generations are facing narratives of another civil war without knowing the history of the first, leaving them prone to divisive sectarian currents and propaganda that destroyed their country. Without such reforms, new generations remain vulnerable to said sectarian propaganda and are denied understanding their history, thus condemned to repeat it. We will examine how the Lebanese curriculum approaches historical and political events such as the civil war and its subsequent events.

To address the shortcomings of the national citizenship curriculum, Akar (2020) critiques the authoritarian Lebanese curriculum that refrains from addressing sensitive topics for fear of igniting conflicts. He calls for empowering teachers and supporting their agency to foster critical thinking when it comes to citizenship-related issues in the classroom. However, a legitimate concern arises with the absence of a political decision that produces a cohesive national framework for citizenship education.

Enabling teachers individually could have adverse effects. After all, teachers are victims of the educational system and teacher formation themselves, and their personal backgrounds and political views could deepen the schism instead of enforcing an inclusive national identity. Thus, the question becomes: How do teachers, both facilitators and victims of the country's sectarian system, navigate these dynamics and controversies in their classrooms?

4.2. History of Education in Lebanon

Education in Lebanon is a direct product of the country's colonial past and sectarian political present, with its ongoing crises. During the French mandate, education was harnessed to promote nationalist ideologies within private schools and their independent religious programs, which led to the institutional fragmentation we witness today (Frayha 2012). The colonial legacy of sectarian control over school curricula, including sensitive subjects in citizenship education, has instilled and perpetuated conflicting narratives of the country's past and present. After independence, multiple efforts were made to establish public schools and produce patriotic citizenship education programs, but they were severely obstructed by sectarian polarization and years of bloody conflicts.

After the civil war, and with a reinforced political system distributing power along sectarian lines, education remains divisive, with sects holding tight control over most private schools and public education weakened by mismanagement and the latest economic crisis. Each group promotes its own narrative of citizenship education that alienates other groups, per the interests of its respective ruling elite and affiliated clergy, and all these sects unite to halt reform plans. With their powerful patronage networks, these groups still dominate civic life in Lebanon, reducing education to minimalist notions of broad and generic rights and duties and marginalizing critical reflections on the systematic political problems underpinning these notions (Akar 2008).

The versions of citizenship advanced by these sectarian networks in schools are rather abstract, with depoliticized concepts of rights and duties like national loyalty, obedience, and moral values. However, any critical engagement with underlying political structures in the country that shape this system is methodically excluded.

4.3. The Origins of "Amnesia"

The institutional amnesia surrounding the Lebanese Civil War is deliberately instilled by the elites to suppress critical discourse about the fifteen-year-long conflict. Moving from street fights, death squads, checkpoints, kidnapping, mutilation, and looting to legislating and policymaking, these elites fiercely maintain tight control over issues surrounding the war in formal education. This is particularly evident in the elites' consensus to approve a unified History textbook despite years of work by experts to develop one.

The roots of this amnesia go back to the 1943 National Pact that formalized power-sharing among traditional elites who hold control through patronage. In the 1960s, major factors destabilized these networks. Urbanization, migration, education, and new political movements of the global left, Arab nationalism, and the Palestinian struggle, in addition to widespread armament within different factions like Palestinian groups, fueled the civil war in 1975 (Haugbolle 2010). After the ceasefire, the dominant narrative shifted the focus to external factors as the main reasons for the conflict, thus exonerating Lebanese factions. The Taef Accords and the General Amnesty Law with its "no victor, no vanquished" slogan absolved militia leaders and consolidated their power within the sectarian system.

Furthermore, post-war reconstruction projects largely led by Rafik Hariri wiped out buildings and neighborhoods that witnessed the destruction and displaced their residents to erect Western-style streets. These calculated measures sanitized the past and inhibited public engagement with memories of the war. Simultaneously, on the popular level, survivors repressed their memories to cope with its traumatic scars, and younger generations were faced with a plethora of conflicting stories in the absence of a coherent state narrative in their education (Haugbolle 2010).

Although formal accounts of the war were suppressed by the state, artists and writers challenged this amnesia by addressing unresolved trauma and critiquing both war and post-war societies. However, many of these representations were unable to get past dominant sectarian divisions and often portrayed civilians as mere victims, thus failing to capture the complexities of sectarian violence (Haugbolle 2010). The consequent vacuum in History education, where the civil war is not even mentioned, exacerbates students' inability to understand the roots and patterns in contemporary political crises.

The postwar era saw a growing conflict between sectarianism and national identity, yet it solidified the former in the state and collective memory. Cultural initiatives to promote memory and dialogue continue to be resisted. With the fiftieth commemoration of the civil war, Lebanon is still struggling with its violent past and repressing its causes that are still causing political crises. Generations of Lebanese in the past half-century are left in the dark about the origins and events of the civil war.

4.4. Teaching Between the Lines: Echoes of Informal History Education in Lebanon

The absence of consensus on national history textbooks leaves students vulnerable to sectarian propaganda and political manipulation, which hinders civic engagement and citizenship (Akar

2008). Schools are still resorting to outdated textbooks or makeshift teacher-made summaries that vary across educational institutions.

Despite this systematic omission, just as cultural spaces challenge this systemic amnesia, informal education arises spontaneously in the classroom. Teachers and students open discussions about political developments and history. These discussions are also often confined within sectarian limits, which curtails this critical dialogue. Not to forget that teachers themselves are products of this sectarian system, which makes their citizenship perceptions and pedagogical practices tainted by sectarian loyalties, to varying extents (Akar 2008). Structural reforms are still essential at the levels of formal and informal education to limit and change the reproduction of the status quo.

Pedagogically, despite said informal discussion, there is often a lack of structured reflection that links current topics to broader competencies of citizenship education. Teachers may feel hesitant and unprepared to critically tackle these class discussions due to a lack of institutional support and training. Cultural works like novels, diverse art, and films can still help students explore the civil war. Introductions to this theme can be done through the war's social and psychological consequences. Tania Saleh's What a Night and Ghassan Salhab's Terra Incognita explore these themes.

Another essential lesson to learn from the civil war is to look at divisions between the Lebanese horizontally in terms of class rather than vertically through sects. By highlighting shared experiences and suffering, students can see beyond sectarianism that serves to perpetuate the status quo. Films like West Beirut and art installations like Nada Sahnaoui's Atadhakkar (I remember) can serve as invaluable tools to foster dialogue and coexistence in an organic way through seeing the war's consequences on people from all sects. Moving beyond overviews of the war to critical citizenship lessons, films like Randa Chahal Sabag's Civilisé(e)s consolidate notions of sect and class and their roles in the history of Lebanon. Whether within the civics/history periods or as extracurricular activities, teachers can base debates, guided discussions, or workshops on such works to bypass the amnesia and curricular gaps in an attempt to restore citizenship education.

Students learn to confront so-called taboos and uncomfortable truths to learn about their country's past and understand its role in the present crises shaping their futures. Outside the classroom, many Civil Society Organizations provide venues to discuss the memory of the war. "Act for the Disappeared" brings awareness to the issue of the forcibly disappeared during the Lebanese civil war, whose fate is still unknown to this day. Projects with such organizations provide students with a deeper engagement with their history, which creates a safe space for them to challenge civil war myths and address its inherited unresolved trauma. Unfortunately, students' participation remains disparate since these initiatives are scattered and often centered in cities, namely Beirut, making them less accessible to peripheral schools, which exacerbates educational inequalities.

Informal citizenship education that starts with spontaneous class discussions and extends to organized debates and activities with the help of cultural and artistic productions has the potential to foster critical thinking and instill a culture of democracy and accountability into future generations. This potential remains theoretical until it is founded on policy-level support, teacher training, and integration into the broader curriculum.

4.5. Teaching Without Tools: Limitations of Informal Citizenship Education

Informal citizenship education encompasses classroom discussions and activities, family networks, and media. It plays a dual role in the context of Lebanon's sectarian society. On the one hand, it can narrow the curriculum's theoretical gaps and provide applications and practical experiences to students. However, it is often plagued by sectarian tendencies, political limitations, and institutional problems. Informal classroom discussions of current and past events tend to be brief, as teachers are hesitant to delve deeper into conversations for fear of exacerbating sectarian tensions and causing political backlash (Akar 2008). Moreover, these discussions are often haphazard and depend on the teachers' or students' agency and their receptiveness. This makes them inconsistent, thus an unreliable source of critical thinking for learners (Akar 2008).

More inconsistencies and status quo reproduction arise from the absence of a unified history curriculum. Some teachers resort to oral and unofficial narratives that tend to reflect preexisting sectarian schisms or project current political issues onto historical events in ways that similarly align

with sectarian loyalties (Frayha 2019). Efforts to harmonize citizenship education in Lebanon are often curtailed by the margin of curricular autonomy private sectarian schools enjoy.

Outside the classroom, informal citizenship education stems from families, religious institutions, and the media. The latter in its traditional politically affiliated and increasingly influential on social media platforms. These sources shape students' perceptions of history and civic engagement, often to greater lengths than schools. The increasing polarization of traditional and social media sources confines users to propaganda and partisan perspectives, which affects their abilities to think critically and reach a nuanced understanding of citizenship. Furthermore, and as outlined earlier, many civil society organizations have become NGO-ized – aligned with donor agendas and apolitical- which curtails their ability to offer an alternative realm for citizenship education due to the unwillingness to create an official curriculum (Shuayb et al., 2024).

In conclusion, constructive informal citizenship education in Lebanon is limited by political and institutional factors. Despite its potential and the reliance on impromptu discussions to ignite citizenship rhetoric, informal education cannot substitute for the need for formal educational reforms based on critical political thinking and historical awareness.

4.6. Teachers at the Frontline of Civic Engagement

As the deficiencies of citizenship education become evident, examining the role of educators in this process is essential. Teachers in Lebanon are at a critical intersection: they are simultaneously facilitators and key agents in the classroom, as well as victims of the sectarian political system that constrains and discourages them from addressing sensitive topics. Many of them dodge the issue altogether; they impose censorship on themselves and their students in the classroom to avoid potential conflicts and disciplinary actions from the administration or broader political actors. This censorship is not purely external; it is an internalized form of compliance shaped by years of amnesia and instability that lead to silence on "contentious issues".

In mixed neighborhoods, many teachers avoid discussing the Lebanese civil war for fear of inflaming tensions among students from different sectarian and political backgrounds. In more homogeneous areas, teachers may promote dominant narratives that reinforce the community's sectarian-political stance, either by omitting or emphasizing certain notions. These classroom dynamics vis-à-vis citizenship education reflect the legacy of amnesty without accountability that fragmented education while ironically unifying it under the banner of communal loyalty rather than national identity.

While some educators succumb to this neutrality or are forced into it, others take calculated risks in fostering dialogue and critical thinking. While this may look positive, it has the potential to be detrimental in the case of some educators injecting their ideology and advocating for their community's version, as mentioned above. On the collective level, teachers in Lebanon lack healthy political representation as their unions were co-opted by traditional political parties. This limits their ability to advocate for much-needed change in curricula. Moreover, the latest economic crisis is still ravaging their salaries, now reduced to a few hundred dollars, which has pushed them below the poverty line and making ends meet to survive. Alternative unions for contractual teachers in public schools have emerged, yet still face legal restrictions (Shuayb et al., 2024). This severe financial precarity curtails the much-needed pedagogical innovation.

In sum, teachers in Lebanon embody the incongruities of citizenship education. They are entrusted with preparing citizens for democratic participation within a polity characterized by little political agency outside traditional sectarian silos. Educators are somehow expected to advance national unity in youngsters in the heart of a fragmented system that also affects them. Their navigation of these dynamics is discrepant; complicit at times, courageous at others, but always volatile.

4.7. New Dawn or Age-Old Mirage? The Symbolism of Change in Lebanon's Political Landscape

Lebanon and its neighboring countries are undergoing significant political shifts. From the war in Gaza and Lebanon, the sweeping change in regime in Syria, and the Israel-Iran war, the region's fate is unclear. Nationally, the election of President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam and

his newly appointed cabinet in early 2025 has sparked cautious optimism for many Lebanese and hopes of reforms and stability after devastating crises and a war. With the challenges of restoring the state's full sovereignty, leading the reconstruction of war-torn areas, and comprehensive reforms to stabilize its devalued currency, revive public services, and fight corruption, education should also be made a priority.

Prior to these recent developments, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) had launched its five-year plan (2021-2025), which centers around curricular reforms. This plan emphasizes a competency-based curriculum that promotes critical thinking, tolerance, civic engagement, and social justice. Teachers started receiving professional development in student-centered methodologies and community service. The plan hopes to enhance civic responsibility and democracy with learners as active citizens in their country (UNESCO 2023).

In her first televised interview aired on June 2nd, 2025, Dr. Rima Karami, the minister of education and higher education in Salam's government, talked about working on a guiding vision that would orient the ministry's work. She emphasized the need for a new structure after reconsidering some laws and regulations, especially those pertaining to digitization and technology integration (LBCI Lebanon 2025). In another interview with Legal Agenda, Dr. Karami stressed the shift from a crisis management model that was dominant in the last few years to systemic reforms anchored in this vision of the "national school". She emphasized a student-centered approach based not only on academic but also social and psychological needs, with a focus on compensating cumulative "learning losses" caused by the economic collapse, COVID-19 pandemic, Beirut Port explosion, and the Israeli war. Starting with analyzing the results of a first-of-a-kind country-wide diagnostic test for primary students in public schools to identify gaps in Arabic, foreign languages, and math, programs tailored to students' specific needs will follow (Enmaeya News 2025).

When it comes to low teacher salaries, perhaps the most salient problem threatening public schools, Karami acknowledged that their pay is currently "deplorable" and committed to advocating for fairer salaries. She then cautioned that a much-needed salary increase across the board is unlikely given budget restraints and contingent upon "donors," and called for teachers to "be patient" after more than five years of inaction and deteriorating living conditions. Karami did not address any solid and sustainable government plan to adjust teachers' salaries instead of relying on volatile donations.

In fact, despite the financial and fiscal meltdown, the state has been accumulating more than USD 7 billion from tax revenues in the central bank to acquire reserves and buy foreign currency for "monetary stability" (Megaphone 2025a). Moreover, the government announced an unfair fuel tax in early June 2025, which affected prices, instead of a progressive ascending tax on merchants amassing large profits. Tax revenues are enough to readjust all civil servants' salaries (Megaphone 2025b).

Despite the dim hope in a national curriculum reform and a new regime, major structural issues like teachers' salaries are still unaddressed. This continued marginalization of public-school teachers not only curtails an effective education overall, and citizenship education specifically, but reproduces the superficial and managed citizenship model that is in turn perpetuating the political status quo. An effective and transformative citizenship education must be founded on a national vision centering social justice, economic equity, and political agency not only theoretically in curricula, but also in the lives of those who teach it.

4.8. Reclaiming Citizenship Education in Lebanon

Citizenship education in Lebanon is an institutional problem rooted in the sectarian political system. Reforms must also be systemic and holistic. A national curriculum that embodies a balanced, yet evidence-based narrative of history and civics is only achieved through a conscious and conscientious political decision. While international organizations can provide a great deal of expertise on the logistical and financial levels, educational material should be primarily developed by experts in history and pedagogy.

The overarching aims of any reform must start with quality free and compulsory education, efficient spending and teaching, and regular auditing and oversight of school infrastructure. Crucially, educators must be paid fairly and benefit from welfare programs like health coverage. Short-term reforms should address catch-up classes to recover learning losses caused by years of

compounding crises, alongside psychosocial support for students affected by the war and rehabilitating damaged public schools.

Medium- to long-term reforms, and we do not know the extent to which the country can still afford more stalling, must focus on the advancement of citizenship education across all levels and subjects. This begins with a holistic curricular reform of the 1997 curriculum that incorporates critical thinking, historical understanding, and digital literacy. Citizenship education must aim for engaged learners capable of active political participation in their country and aware of the state of the world. Following this, traditional examinations centered around memorization must be replaced with real-world applications of knowledge that promote collaborative learning and civic dialogue. A curriculum that responds to the needs of Lebanon must also ensure enough flexibility to respond to the diverse needs of different communities while maintaining a cohesive national framework. Partnerships with civil society, especially organizations specializing in conflict and post-conflict resolution, and critical media literacy should be leveraged *en route* to full reforms.

As we mentioned before, no real curriculum change can be implemented without teacher-related reforms. Raising teaching hours equitably, linking salaries to performance and training with promotion pathways, restoring tenures for deserving teachers, and attracting young professionals by reinstating the Lebanese University's Faculty of Pedagogy programs with student stipends linked to mandatory civil service. Financing these reforms can be done through redirecting state subsidies from semi-private schools (often owned by wealthy sectarian institutions) to public schools, as well as educational subsidies benefiting wealthy high-ranking civil servants.

The ultimate challenge is not a simple technical reform of the Lebanese national curriculum but a political reimagination of this latter and anchoring it in critical citizenship to break the cycle of sectarian reproduction.

5. PALESTINE AS A CROSS-CUTTING LENS ON CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Palestine has strengthened, united, and divided the Arab World, being a simultaneous source of resistance and contempt. It transcends geopolitics and redefines citizenship and human rights, especially in the Arab World. The treatment of the Palestinian cause in citizenship curricula in Arab countries unravels most of the aforementioned issues and gaps between civic realities affecting youth consciousness and rigid state narratives; from omission to sanitization or engagement to varying extents. In Tunisia, Lebanon, and the UAE, Palestine elucidates the controversies of citizenship education and disruptive knowledge: teaching the history of resistance and crossing national interests with solidarity.

As the only lasting settler colony in the world, Palestine is the symbol of anti-colonial resistance that spurred Arab solidarity but also long-standing rifts between states and their subjects. The most common examples include Black September events in Jordan and Gulf countries and Egypt's suppression of pro-Palestinian dissent. These Arab states often depict the advocacy for Palestine as a threat to their national "stability". They take drastic measures to limit academic freedoms and related civic discourse, which directly contradicts human rights and freedom principles superficially taught in their curricula. Consequently, there is a pedagogical void when it comes to Palestine in Arab textbooks that either adopt a reductionist humanitarian approach to the struggle or omit it completely.

In Lebanon, the Palestinian cause is central to the country's modern history. Palestinian militarization deepened the sectarian divide during the civil war, and refugees' marginalization, e.g., employment and ownership bans, is testing the country's commitment to human rights. Consequently, multiple debates have been sparked about the Palestinian issue and its effects on Lebanese citizenship and national identity. As we mentioned before, history textbooks in Lebanon do not address the civil war altogether. Some history textbooks reference the 1948 Nakba and the subsequent displacement of Palestinians to Lebanon, among other countries. Many students would study Arabic literature through Palestinian writers like Mahmoud Darwish, who explores themes of Palestinian identity, exile, and resistance. Informally, many schools organize events related to Palestine, like the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People on November 29 and Nakba Day on May 15. With that being said, and despite the war reaching Lebanon in 2024, the existence of these discussions, their tone, and the extent of their discussions vary widely depending on the school's administration, location, and preconceived sensitivities. The Lebanese national curriculum still omits Palestine's role, which leaves youth unprepared for present challenges of militarization and demilitarization.

On the other hand, since Lebanon hosts Palestinian refugees, their formal education has been entrusted to UNRWA. With 65 schools across Lebanon serving over 39,000 Palestinian students, their curriculum integrates supplemental material related to Palestinian identity and civic values. The Human Rights, Conflict Resolution, and Tolerance (HRCRT) program explores issues of justice, right of return, and identity through the lens of the Palestinian experience. Moreover, UNRWA schools organize student parliament elections where students often engage in discussions about their heritage (UNRWA n.d.).

Pathways for reform in Lebanese schools include partnerships with NGOs to share testimonies from Palestinian refugees and Lebanese militiamen involved in the civil war, civics modules on human rights contrasting UNRWA's refugee mandate with the Lebanese constitution, partnerships between Lebanese and Palestinian students, and following up on the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

The UAE publicly supports Palestine while normalizing ties with Israel. This contradiction is reflected in education, especially in the Moral Education Program (MEP) that promotes tolerance and discusses global issues like poverty and climate change while avoiding any critique of the occupation and its dire consequences at these levels. This mirrors the state's stance and its security priorities.

Reforms in the country's apolitical citizenship curriculum can push to include Palestine within MEP case studies on international law. This can shed light on this cause and teach critical thinking without directly challenging state positions. UN debates can also be stimulated in class, and UN Security Council sessions allow students to role-play diverse perspectives within this controlled environment. Moreover, media literacy is crucial, especially when comparing the discrepancies between national channels and others like Al Jazeera in covering the ongoing genocide.

After 2011, Tunisia included Palestine and embraced its cause within the Tunisian revolutionary identity. Tunisia has repeatedly refused to normalize with Israel and "fully and unconditionally"

supported the Palestinian people after October 7. On the popular level, Tunisians took to the streets to protest in solidarity with the Palestinian people, with solidarity encampments across many universities in the country. However, under Saied's autocratic rule, pro-Palestine movements, among other political dissent, face surveillance and occasional crackdowns (El Atti 2024).

When it comes to citizenship education in Tunisia, despite adding human rights modules to civics textbooks after 2011, there is a lack of references to Palestine. Moreover, history curricula do not mention the role of Tunisia in the Palestinian struggle, such as its hosting of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) after they were expelled from Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in 1982 and up until 1994.

Pathways to reform citizenship education in Tunisia when it comes to discussing the Palestinian cause can be promising. Start by establishing a link between Palestine and Tunisia's transitional justice lessons, with common grounds like resistance through arts. Comparative colonialism (French vs. Zionist settler colonialism) can clearly elucidate shared injustices like cultural erasure, land confiscation, and resistance strategies.

The Israeli war on Gaza is still indelibly shaping Arab youth and their stunted political consciousness. Palestine is no longer a distant symbolic cause, but a litmus test for citizenship education. As Palestinians are being ethnically cleansed and starved, Arab states' responses and their educational reflections reveal fundamental tensions between curricula's theoretical aims and their actual contents. This failure to integrate Palestine compounds the aforementioned shortcomings of citizenship education in each of the examined countries. It perpetuates a schizophrenic citizenship where children memorize vague concepts they see violated on TikTok.

6. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Education can never be an apolitical endeavor; it is an inherently political process. The development of this sector in the Arab World is intertwined with political developments, governing bodies, and their ideologies. Whether during colonial rule, post-independence nation-building, or contemporary models and challenges, education has simultaneously mirrored political transformations and maintained them. In Tunisia, Lebanon, and the UAE, education evolved alongside the status quo and reinforced this latter through shaping national identity and political life.

Education in the Arab World must be reimagined beyond stiff neoliberal frameworks in favor of a holistic model that prioritizes citizenship education and the connection to one's setting. This does not contradict employability; in fact, integrating a healthy citizenship education fosters critical thinking, social responsibility, and a holistic understanding of the individual's and communities' roles within an interconnected and diverse society. These 21st-century skills are sought-after in every discipline.

6.1. Rethinking Citizenship Education in the Arab World: A Critical Perspective

Citizenship education in the Arab World has been a product of historical events and global influences that mostly reflect Western thought in governance. However, as this report shows, this framework often clashes with the region's sociopolitical realities. There is an orientalist tendency to show the Arab World as backwards and still behind on citizenship, thus shaping citizenship education standards devised by the West for its societies. After 9/11, the concept of neo-orientalism emerged within the "War on Terror". This concept still frames democracy in the Arab World through this lens (Kerboua 2016).

Neo-orientalism seems to be on the rise after 2011, with the prospects of new democracies or shocks throughout Arab dictatorships; Western standards are increasingly projected and even imposed on new conceptualizations of citizenship, and therefore, citizenship education. Neo-orientalist discourses, especially those shaped by neo-conservatives and pro-Israel circles, portray Arab societies as inherently undemocratic, conflict-prone, and in need of Western intervention (Kerboua 2016). This is mirrored in the ways citizenship is framed to prioritize obedience and stability over political engagement, which in turn translates into controlled approaches to citizenship education as discussed above.

In light of neo-Orientalism, there is a pressing need to reassess citizenship and its education in the Arab World in ways that move beyond Western-centric models. Indigenous histories and forms of governance should be considered. Most importantly, all forms of historical and social injustices inflicted upon the region must be critically addressed.

Citizenship education in the Arab world is examined and measured through the lens and frameworks of Western scholarship. While it is true that citizenship in the modern nation-state materialized in Europe, the Arab World did not lack its own conceptualizations of citizenship in communities, political life, and governance, while Europe was plagued by endless wars. Centuries later, and before the detrimental colonial rule in the 20th century, the Middle East was ecumenical and pluralistic; different identities and governance were intertwined, which resulted in coexistence and relative peace compared to other regions of the world.

Western narratives of citizenship advance a somewhat linear progression towards modernity where Arabs lag, for they are "incapable" of achieving democratic citizenship. Scholars like Isin (2012) argue that citizenship in postcolonial contexts must be seen as an "unfinished project" that necessitates a rethinking of political subjectivity outside Western Paradigms. Isin expanded Said's concept of Orientalism to include legal and political dimensions with the aim of showing how colonial powers systematically erased indigenous political systems and replaced them with artificial nation-state structures that continue to have a definite influence on Arab politics to this day. Therefore, to truly understand citizenship and citizenship education in the Arab World, we must opt out of Western paradigms and start with the region's own history when it comes to political identity and civic participation.

The challenge here goes beyond mere reforms of citizenship curricula to adopting a new epistemological framework through which citizenship is understood, since the views Arab people have of themselves have been manipulated. Deconstructing these narratives on the road to

citizenship education boils down to a political decision by the state. For instance, classical Arab scholars like Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Al Farabi extensively pondered concepts of governance, ethics, and social cohesion long before Western theories of modern citizenship. Ibn Khaldun's seminal work "Muqaddimah" introduced concepts like "Asabiyyah" (social solidarity) that played a seminal role in the formation of political subjects that we now label "citizens".

Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah and Al-Farabi explored ethical governance and the relationship between rulers and the ruled within a communal framework. In the 20th century, Taha Hussein examined Islamic traditions and their influence on governance. Post-colonial theorists like Said and Fanon wrote about critical perspectives and colonialism's role in shaping and reshaping identity and political belonging. The majority of literature on citizenship education in Tunisia, Lebanon, and the UAE fails to acknowledge these contributions while conceptualizing and measuring citizenship education. Incorporating native perspectives into devising and applying citizenship education curricula takes back the agency towards a more self-determined application of citizenship rooted in the region's and respective countries' histories, thus tailored to fit the needs of a citizenry.

6.2. Rethinking Citizenship Education: Lessons from the UAE, Tunisia, and Lebanon

The UAE offers a good lesson in integrating citizenship education into all subjects of the curriculum, just like what they did with their Moral Education Program (MEP), in spite of its critique being apolitical. This demonstrates a model for embedding citizenship education in broader learning experiences instead of treating it separately.

In Lebanon, as we mentioned before, students in elite private schools also receive international education which prepares them for global mobility, yet many remain disconnected from their country's political issues. This is exacerbated by the absence of a national History curriculum.

Similarly, in Tunisia, citizenship education, although attempting to factor in and mirror the country's democratic transition, remains largely theoretical on global issues of human rights. This begs the question of the possibility of engaging learners in international activism without allowing them to acquire knowledge and practice about their own political stances within their countries. One of the most salient global issues is Climate Change. Engaging in meaningful knowledge-seeking and experiences about mitigating its destructive effects should take into consideration the role of multinationals as main contributors, thus enabling policies at the country level.

6.3. The Role of Non-Formal Education and Social Media

In the face of rigid state-controlled curricula and the difficulty of bypassing them in the short term, informal spaces of education are on the rise. Social media platforms have become instrumental in political education across Tunisia, Lebanon, the UAE, and the whole world. Youth are increasingly turning to these alternative spaces to make up for the true citizenship education they have been missing in formal classrooms. Debates about political stances, activism, and alternative narratives are found within social media.

During the Arab uprisings of 2011, social media played a crucial role in Tunisia and even in Lebanon in mobilizing people and exposing them to civic engagement that their schools have long missed. Crises in Tunisia and Lebanon continue to fuel political activism and calls for reforms amidst advanced organization of youth, many of whom have become political movements and parties that bypass the biases of traditional media outlets.

In the UAE, political activism is highly restricted, and social media is carefully monitored. However, it still plays a role in shaping public discourse where people discuss issues like gender equality and climate change.

Social media has the potential to offer a genuine account of citizenship education to the youth. Perhaps the most pertinent example is the fact that many people around the world knew about the plight of the Palestinians through TikTok, which has fueled student riots in Europe and North America. However, it can also be polarizing, spreading misinformation, and reinforcing echo chambers.

6.4. Balancing Curricula in Times of Rapid Political Change

One of the greatest challenges for citizenship education in the Arab World is keeping curricula on board for fast-paced political and social changes. Although this region is one of the most unstable in the world, its curricula have been lagging, failing to adapt to new realities.

In Tunisia, the post-revolution government amended education curricula to incorporate topics on democracy and human rights; however, the modifications were incremental and narrow. Therefore, school and university graduates have theoretical knowledge of democracy, minus the practical skills to take part in active participation. Likewise, the Lebanese history textbooks have not been revised to include major events, like the 2005 Cedar Revolution, the 2019 mass protests and political crisis, the 2020 Beirut blast, or the 2024 Israeli War, events that have largely contributed to modern Lebanese identity and civic awareness.

This dilemma is particularly sharp in the UAE, for which stability is a top priority. While the nation has invested heavily in education reform, political events—such as the Abraham Accords with Israel—are rarely addressed in citizenship curricula, limiting the ability of students to critically analyze regional diplomatic shifts. To align curricula with fast-changing political realities, Arab education systems must adopt a more dynamic and responsive model of citizenship education. This could involve:

- Periodic curriculum updates to reflect ongoing political developments.
- Engaging pedagogical methods that allow students to engage with real case studies and contemporary affairs.
- Greater integration of online materials providing up-to-date information on civic and global issues.
- Promoting open classroom discussions in which students can critically engage with emerging social and political trends.

6.5. A Call for a More Balanced Citizenship Education

The success of neoliberal educational ideologies in Tunisia, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates has caused a disconnection between education systems and the real-life experience of citizenship. As the value of global citizenship education is more and more stressed in an intricately globalized world, its success relies on students initially establishing a strong background in national civic involvement. Education should exceed the narrowness of job preparation and standardized testing to cultivate political consciousness, moral reflection, and social obligation.

As non-traditional arenas, namely social media, continue to be driving forces behind the civic engagement of youth, conventional education systems must evolve. Schools need to integrate more interactive, real-world discussions within citizenship education so that students are not only cognizant of problems in the global arena but also empowered to solve problems in their own communities.

Finally, the political landscape of the Arab world is volatile; thus, more responsive and adaptive educational systems are necessary. Citizenship education must be reconceived not as a static subject but as a living, dynamic discipline that enables students to interact with and shape their political and social worlds. Otherwise, education will remain a passive instrument of the status quo rather than an instrument of meaningful civic transformation.

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