

Ministry of Culture or No Ministry of Culture?

Lebanese Cultural Players and Authority

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In early 1971, a group of Lebanese artists called for the creation of a ministry of culture in Lebanon. Not content with their interests being nominally represented by the ministry of education, they drafted a declaration on what state support of culture they wanted, at the top of which was a ministry of culture. A debate on whether such a ministry was needed and what form it should take ensued. It was not until 1993 that a ministry was created, albeit with a limited budget and responsibility. Calls for a more supportive involvement of the state in cultural production have resurfaced periodically. This article looks at the relationship of Lebanese artists and cultural players to state institutions, in particular the ministry of culture. Why do cultural players in Lebanon call for the state's involvement in cultural production, while in most countries of the region they wish for less involvement? Where do they see a role for the state? What is it that artists and cultural players who are not content with the status quo ask for?

By looking at the debates around public cultural institutions, this article seeks to shed light on how cultural policies are made in Lebanon and to add a dimension to our understanding of the Lebanese state, the viability of which is often questioned. Reversing the notion of liberation, it questions whether liberation is inherently a process that involves dissent from or challenges to institutional structures, or whether institutional structures can support liberating processes. If there is no dominant state structure to rebel against, can an increased state support of culture have liberating qualities? This article will focus on the early 1970s in Lebanon, when a bill for setting up a ministry of culture was presented in parliament and discussed among intellectual circles, and on the discussions of the early to mid-1990s, when a ministry was established. At a time when cultural institution building is booming in Lebanon, with a host of new private, public, and semipublic institutions opening or in the process of being set up, the debates held around the ministry of culture highlight some of the dynamics of the relationship of cultural players to authority.¹

For insights into these debates, I rely mostly on the Lebanese daily newspaper *An-Nahar* and its weekly supplement, in addition to public records such as laws published in the Lebanese administration's

1. In 2015, the Sursock Museum reopened its doors after an extensive renovation (www.sursockmuseum.org), the Aishti Foundation space opened in the same year (www.aishti.com/foundation/collection), and an architecture competition was launched by APEAL for a contemporary art museum close to the National Museum, "A Museum in the Making"

(www.apeal-lb.org). Building works on the cultural space Beit Beirut were completed in 2016, while works on Solidere's Beirut City History Museum are ongoing, to name but a few. For a discussion of understandings of "institutionalism" and the perceived lack thereof in Lebanon, see Toukan, "On Being the Other."

official gazette. The ministry of culture—when prompted—denied it had any records concerning its establishment, other than the publicly available laws. I conducted a survey of contributions written by different authors (including journalists, poets, critics, clerics, and university professors) in *An-Nahar* and its cultural supplement on the ministry of culture in the early 1970s and the 1990s. Politically on the center right, *An-Nahar* under its editor in chief Ghassan Tueni was one of the most circulated Lebanese dailies.² *An-Nahar*'s weekly cultural supplement (*Mulhaq An-Nahar*, published between 1964 and 2015) was read by most intellectuals in Lebanon and had an identity separate from the newspaper of which it was a part, leaning more to the left of center. The supplement was edited by poet and journalist Unsi al-Hajj in the 1960s and 1970s, and by novelist and journalist Elias Khoury in the 1990s and 2000s, and became a platform for critical voices from its beginnings.³ The cultural supplement was critical of the political system but voiced this criticism largely from within the system, unlike other influential cultural publications that questioned the whole system, such as *Al-Adab*. Whereas *An-Nahar*—as well as to some extent the francophone Lebanese daily *L'Orient* (and, after its merger with *Le Jour* in 1971, *L'Orient-Le Jour*)—documented the debates around the setting up of a ministry of culture in the 1970s and 1990s in their daily columns, opinion pieces, and in long features, magazines like *Al-Adab* did not discuss the establishment of this public institution at all. Rather, in an article in 1970 one of *Al-Adab*'s correspondents pointed out their unwillingness to listen to any empty talk about change or development short of an outright regime change, and they characterized the ruling class's agenda in Lebanon as maintaining a “culture in the service of the system (*nizam*),” exploiting the people to serve their interests.⁴ Having a pan-Arab progressive outlook, *Al-*

Adab's mission in its survey of cultural activities in the Arab homeland (*watan*) was to define the intellectual base of cultural work, rather than focusing on infrastructures.⁵ While I have consulted other newspapers and magazines, *An-Nahar* has proven to be the most valuable source for this essay, as it portrayed and reflected on the establishment of a ministry of culture in Lebanon in the two periods under investigation.

Before delving into a discussion of the setting up of the ministry of culture in Lebanon, I want to sketch out briefly the regional context concerning state involvement in culture. In a study on cultural policies in a number of Arab countries, cultural policy specialist Dragičević Šešić distinguishes between different models of cultural policy in the Arab region.⁶ With the exception of Lebanon and Palestine, the state plays a central role in cultural production in the countries under study. The ministry of culture in Egypt founded under Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1958, for instance, set out to centralize cultural production and the dissemination of culture. The state became the largest patron and supporter of the arts. While there were attempts to downsize the ministry and even to dissolve it altogether during the rule of Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat (1970–81), state support for the arts increased again under Hosni Mubarak's presidency (1981–2011). The ministry was marked by a bloated bureaucracy and corruption.⁷ In Syria, the ministry of culture was also founded in 1958, during the short-lived union with Egypt (the United Arab Republic, 1958–61). The ministry henceforth became the main organ in charge of cultural life in the country, through its many subunits and directorates, “ruled by strong central planning and a censored, controlled cultural life.” In Jordan, the royal family “acts as a supporter, funder and often initiator of public events and governmental policy instruments.”⁸ The role of the ministries of culture

2. Harb, “Antoine Choueiri,” 38.

3. Khoury, “Lamenting *An-Nahar*'s Cultural Supplement.”

4. Alwan, “Lebanon: Culture.”

5. Khashba, “Arab Republic of Egypt.”

6. The six dominant models of cultural policy in the Arab region according to this study are the patronage model (Jordan), the state socialist model (Syria), the étatic paternalist model (Maghreb countries), the mixed étatic market-oriented model (Egypt), the market-driven model (Lebanon), and the nonsystematized civil society-led model (Palestine). See Dragičević Šešić, “Opening Horizons,” 236–38.

7. For a discussion of Egypt's cultural politics, see Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, and von Maltzahn, “Governance of Culture.”

8. Dragičević Šešić, “Opening Horizons,” 236. For a full overview of Syrian state institutions dealing with culture, see Al Khatib and Yazaji, *Cultural Policies in Syria*.

in the Arab region has been mainly one of centralizing and controlling culture, becoming the patron of state-directed cultural production. Dragičević Šešić's "market-driven model," on the other hand, which is found in Lebanon, "integrates values appropriate to both the Anglo-Saxon and Francophone worlds and is Western oriented and liberal. The private sector is of ultimate importance, as it has to develop specific crisis-management skills to develop and survive, while the non-profit sector is internationally linked and more preoccupied with artistic than social achievements."⁹ In this model, cultural production was linked to the global art market, in which the United Arab Emirates played an increasing role as a marketplace for Arab art. Cultural infrastructures in Lebanon have been funded largely by international development funding bodies and private players.¹⁰ If culture is driven by the market and the private sector, what role does the state have to play? And what do cultural players expect from the state?

Artists and intellectuals look for state support of culture as long as it does not intervene in their artistic freedom, and this search for support is connected to the idea of citizenship and rights to culture. Artistic freedom here means the nonintervention of the state in the creative process. At the same time, the demands for greater access to facilities and infrastructures are connected to a sense that this access would be liberating, as it would allow the artist or intellectual to be free to create. In what follows below, I discuss the ambiguities around the meaning of artistic freedom and liberating processes for Lebanese cultural players. The emphasis on artistic freedom has to be understood within the regional context, where the state regularly intervened and controlled cultural production. Cultural players in Lebanon largely perceive their relationship with

the authorities as mutually exclusive, however, with neither side understanding the other and each side driven by their own motives with no comprehensive vision for cultural policies.

Ministry of Culture or No Ministry of Culture?

Ministry of culture or no ministry of culture? This was the question posed in the early 1970s by Lebanese intellectuals and policy makers alike.¹¹ Some were strongly in favor of setting up a ministry dedicated to culture, while others were more skeptical. On January 15, 1971, Ghassan Tuani, then minister of national education and fine arts, called for a meeting with a number of leading Lebanese intellectuals and thinkers at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut to introduce a draft law on the establishment of a ministry of culture in Lebanon.¹² The bill had been presented to the council of ministers two days earlier.¹³ The Lebanese Artists Association for Painting and Sculpture had published a statement around the same time, reiterating its demands for artists in Lebanon that they had previously presented to Tuani. At the top of the association's demands was a ministry of culture, followed by a national museum for contemporary art and other requests relating to cultural infrastructures, such as putting regulation in place to protect Lebanese artistic production, improve arts education, and set up a special fund for the "cultural movement."¹⁴ The bill presented to the council of ministers outlined how the existing ministry of national education and fine arts was supposed to be split into two separate ministries, a ministry of culture and arts, and a ministry of education and teaching. In order to explain and discuss the draft, Tuani invited those "people of culture" (*aḥl al-thaqafa*) to Beirut's UNESCO Palace who were known to have a standpoint on the issue of setting up a ministry of culture, so that they could share their opinions

9. Dragičević Šešić, "Opening Horizons," 237.

10. Toukan, "On Being the Other."

11. Khater, "Where Will the Ministry of Culture Lead Us To?"

12. "The Ministry of Culture between Ghassan Tuani and Thinkers" ("Wizarat al-thaqafa wa al-funun: 4 mudiriyat wa m'ahad 'aal lil-funun; wizarat al-tarbiya wa al-t'alim: 6 mudiriyat

beinuha wahida lil-taftish wa al-muraqiba"), *An-Nahar*, January 14, 1971. The UNESCO Palace was built in 1948 to host the third international congregation of UNESCO, and it became one of the main spaces for large exhibitions and other cultural events.

13. "Ministry of Culture and Arts: Four Directorates and Higher Institute for Arts; Ministry of Education and Teaching: Six

Directorates, amongst Which One for Inspection and Control" ("Wizarat al-thaqafa wa al-funun: 4 mudiriyat wa m'ahad 'aal lil-funun; wizarat al-tarbiya wa al-t'alim: 6 mudiriyat beinuha wahida lil-taftish wa al-muraqiba"), *An-Nahar*, January 15, 1971; Khater, "What Do the Intellectuals Think?."

14. Najem, "The Artists Association."

about the bill. These included some of the leading poets, artists, cultural players, and intellectuals of the time.

Tueni explained that the bill was open for discussion and amendments. In the ensuing discussion, as summarized in articles by art critics Nazih Khater in *An-Nahar* and Mirèse Akar in *L'Orient*, the draft was approached from several aspects. While some pointed out inconsistencies from a legal perspective, relating to ambiguities and contradictions in the proposed structure, others stressed the need to separate culture and education and welcomed the establishment of a ministry of culture, calling it a necessity, such as the poet and writer Georges Schehadé and the director of antiquities Maurice Chehab. Chehab named two main goals of the ministry: namely, to encourage cultural production and to ensure communication between men of culture and the grassroots. There was disagreement about whether a council for culture might be preferable to a ministry, since it might not be burdened with a heavy bureaucracy, with poet Jamil Jabre advocating for a council and Schehadé voting against it.

Participants contested the issue of whether to place the Institute of Fine Arts under the ministry of culture, as proposed in the bill, rather than the ministry of education, which was in charge of the Lebanese University. Painter Munir Najem—speaking on behalf of the Lebanese Artists Association—questioned the separation of the institute from the university, while voicing the association's support of the project of establishing a ministry of culture. Tueni explained that the aim of separating the institute from the university and placing it under the direct supervision of the ministry was to integrate artists into the state structure and make them more attached to it. Edmond Naim, president of the Lebanese University, rejected the idea of a ministry of culture, considering it beyond the means of the Lebanese state, and

proposed an independent body for cultural affairs instead.¹⁵

Dar al-Fan's Janine Rubeiz supported the creation of a ministry of culture,¹⁶ as did Arab Marxist thinker Hussein Mroue, who called for the addition of the phrase "Arab heritage" to the draft, so as not to forget Lebanese Arabism, and for the new ministry to be inclusive in terms of all intellectual currents.¹⁷ Poet and Lebanese nationalist Said Akl was a main proponent of the project, arguing that the setting up of a ministry of culture needed to be encouraged, while the details could be agreed upon at a later stage and should come in the form of a "Declaration of Rights to Culture." He called this preparatory phase a "historic moment." Historian Jawad Boulos, meanwhile, stressed that Lebanon was known for its culture, not war, while some declared sectarianism a threat to the realization of the project, a point others—such as the artist Aref Rayess—disagreed with, treating it as a bad memory of the past.¹⁸ Art critic Nazih Khater in his reporting of the meeting in *An-Nahar* criticized the fact that the topic of youth was completely absent from the discussion, despite a large presence of young people at the gathering, wondering when their voices would be heard: "maybe after the ministry was set up in order to criticize it, or maybe after the bill was rejected in order to cry over it."¹⁹ For the most part, the debate at the UNESCO Palace revolved around the form state support should take—whether in the form of a ministry or a council—rather than the policies of the proposed body. It also showed that it was important for the minister to integrate artists into the state structure and bring the two sides closer together. Finally, some of the participants perceived the politics of sectarianism as a threat to successful politics—a justified fear, as became clear only a few years later with the outbreak of civil war.

The question of whether the ministry of culture would see the light of day or whether the bill

15. When a ministry was eventually set up in the 1990s, the question of where to place the institute of fine arts was solved by joining higher education to the ministry of culture, until they were separated again in 2000.

16. Set up by Janine Rubeiz in 1967 (and closed in 1975), Dar al-Fan provided a platform for

discussion and exchange, other than being an exhibition space. For more on Dar al-Fan, see Editions Dar An-Nahar, *Janine Rubeiz*.

17. The discussion of Lebanon's identity in relation to its Arab heritage vis-à-vis non-Arab heritage—be it Phoenician, Roman, or a European-inspired cultural heritage—has long

been one of the main points of contention over Lebanon's culture.

18. Akar, "M. Tuéni paraît décidé."

19. Khater, "What Do the Intellectuals Think."

would indeed die was the topic of a discussion held at Dar al-Fan—one of Beirut’s most active cultural spaces of the time—two months later. The question was justified, since Tueni, the man behind the draft law, had in the meantime resigned from power. Just a few days after presenting his bill, Tueni submitted his surprise resignation from the multiple positions he held (vice president of the ministerial council, minister of national education, and minister of information) on January 20, 1971, after just three months in office. He did not see himself as able to realize the objectives he had set out to do, feeling that his hands were tied (“If I am in power, it is to practice it, and not to be an honorary minister”), and preferred to return to his place as journalist.²⁰ Tueni was the editor of *An-Nahar*—the newspaper founded by his father Gibran—from 1947 until his death in 2012, with only short interruptions. His resignation from his ministerial positions came in the middle of a wave of student protests at the Lebanese University and Université Saint Joseph, and it showed that ministers had limited choice of action in a country where politics were determined by communitarian imperatives. Chaired by Said Akl, the debate at Dar al-Fan between French cultural attaché to Lebanon Marcel Girard, Polish cultural attaché Julien Forays, and Lebanese intellectuals Georges Naccache and Wassek Adib took place on March 8, 1971, in the form of a panel titled “For a ministry of culture.” The Polish and French cultural attachés talked about their countries’ experiences with ministries of culture, Girard pointing out that one should think not only about how to set up a ministry of culture, but also about what policies the ministry will create. The Lebanese participants agreed on the need to set up a ministry of culture, with Said Akl going as far as saying that “simply by setting up such a ministry, the state would have succeeded in making men of art and letters feel their citizenship.”²¹

Poet and journalist Unsi al-Hajj wrote in the

same vein of his and his fellow intellectuals’ hopes for a ministry of culture, a ministry that would take care of them and protect their rights, a ministry “for this sect of people who don’t have a sect other than art.” Here he clearly wants to distance himself and his milieu from the politics of sectarianism so prevalent in Lebanon, not feeling represented by the system while at the same time perpetuating the system to a certain extent by having interiorized the dominant language of sectarianism. In his plea for a ministry of culture in his column “Words, Words, Words” in *Mulhaq An-Nahar*, Hajj acknowledged that a ministry of culture would be a challenge for the state since it would push its “narrow horizons,” wondering whether the ministry would be “a breath of justice in the desert of injustice and alienation” to cultural players who were not receiving anything but “denial and contempt” from the state. He was hoping that the new ministry, if it saw the light of day, would be able to find the right balance between spending on culture and respecting its freedom, something that he believed only Lebanon among regional states was able to realize. Hajj reminds us that Tueni, in his proposal, stressed the need to respect this freedom (he even speaks of “sanctifying” freedom of culture) and warned that we should all “remember it together, tomorrow.”²² Freedom in this sense was perceived as a right to culture—culture that was not constrained and controlled.

This idea of citizenship and right to culture is importantly connected to how cultural players saw their relationship to the state and what they expected of it. Making artists more attached to the state was an explicit aim of Tueni’s proposal. Seeking institutional support, artists and intellectuals were not against this idea as long as their freedom was guaranteed. Freedom, in this sense, seems to be at odds with the argument made by Hugh Lacey that liberation occurs when bondage is experienced, in which case “the aspiration is to be free *from* that bondage and free *to* live another

20. “La démission-surprise de Tueni: ‘Je considère que, dans les conditions présentes, je ne suis pas en mesure de faire œuvre utile’, déclare le vice-président du Conseil,” *L’Orient*, January 21, 1971.

21. “Tueni’s Project Is the Focus of Debate: ‘If a Ministry of Culture Was Set up in Lebanon, Intellectuals Would Immediately Feel Their Citizenship’” (“Mashru’a Tueni aydan mihwar niqash: law qamit wizarat al-

thaqafa fi lubnan yush’ar fawran ahl al-fikr bi-muwatiniyatihim”), *An-Nahar*, March 10, 1971.

22. Al-Hajj, “From Maroun Abboud to a Ministry of Culture.”

type of life.”²³ He claims that bondage is usually well defined, while the articulation of what form of life one wishes to be free to lead is often much less pronounced. In the case of the debate on state support of culture in Lebanon, rather the opposite can be observed. The bondage is a nonbondage, or a metaphorical bondage in the sense that the status quo cultural players wanted to change was the nonsupport of the state and the nonrecognition of artists’ rights. In other words, they perceived this nonbondage as a restriction to their liberty to create. The form of life they wished to lead, on the other hand, was well voiced in their demands to the authorities. They saw institutional support as enhancing their freedom, support that included the provision of infrastructures such as publicly funded cultural institutions (theaters, museums, art schools), legislation supporting artists, and a public fund for culture.

However, the draft did indeed seem to have died in the end, since there is no further reference to the project after March 1971, and no ministry of culture was set up. News reports of spring 1971 became consumed by student protests, the ministry of culture project all but forgotten. After the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, the country’s priorities shifted. Reference to the project reemerged in the late 1980s, when the general secretary of the association of the Lebanese House for Art, Georges Haddad, paid several visits to politicians and Christian religious leaders in 1987 to ask them for the setting up of a ministry of culture.²⁴

Ministry of Culture: Dream or Nightmare?

It was not until the end of the civil war and the start of the reconstruction phase in the early 1990s that the subject reemerged in force. Some, like Greek-Orthodox patriarch Georges Khodr and Minister of Housing Muhammad Baydun, considered the setting up of a ministry of culture as an important step in “putting Lebanon back on the path of humanity” and “establishing a national

culture with shared values.”²⁵ However, by now the intellectuals and cultural players who had been asking for a ministry of culture (or rejecting the idea) no longer had any say in the matter. Rather, it was decided by those in power to set up a ministry as part of the reconstruction process. While the idea of a ministry had been initiated by intellectuals in the early 1970s, it was now a purely bureaucratic affair. This disconnect of the ministry from the outset might explain its failure to play a role in the cultural life of the country.

A new draft law for a ministry was presented to the council of ministers in early 1992 by Minister of National Education Boutros Harb. He stated his priorities for the ministry as to spread culture, strengthen and support the cultural movement, showcase and preserve Lebanese heritage, set up public libraries, organize exhibitions, conferences, symposia and festivals, and to facilitate the registration process for cultural associations and societies in coordination with the relevant authorities. He emphasized that the success of a ministry of culture did not depend on its structure, but on the “laws that will guide it and the men that will carry its responsibilities,” and that the strength of the ministry would lie in its ability to separate culture from politics and sectarianism.²⁶

In the run-up to the establishment of the ministry some people expressed their fears about having a ministry for culture, arguing that “culture was a creative activity taking place in isolation from politics, programs, frameworks and templates” and referring to how a ministry of culture could also work against culture, as had been seen in totalitarian societies.²⁷ Here again, this position has to be understood in the regional context, which was not encouraging. The hope was for the ministry of culture to deal with cultural matters in a positive and enabling way, fostering talent and strengthening cultural activity by improving the conditions for those working in the cultural domain. Whether such a ministry would turn out to

23. Lacey, “On Liberation,” 219.

24. “A Ministry for Culture” (“Wizarat lil-thaqafa”), *An-Nahar*, May 20, 1987; “A Ministry for Culture” (“Wizarat lil-thaqafa”), *An-Nahar*, May 23, 1987.

25. Khodr, “For a Ministry of Culture”; Nasif, “The Minister of Housing.”

26. Nimer, “The Ministry for Culture”; Boutros Harb Gives a Lecture in Baabda: ‘Ministry of Culture: Dream or Nightmare?’ (“Butrus Harb

muhadaran fi b’abda ‘wizarat al-thaqafa: hilm am kabus”), *An-Nahar*, February 15, 1992.

27. Harb, “A Ministry for Culture.”

be “a dream or a nightmare”—the title of a lecture delivered by Minister Harb—in the end depended on the state’s understanding of culture and its vision for the ministry. One role envisaged for the ministry was to function as a link between decision makers and intellectuals, who at the time held a “mutually exclusive relationship,” where neither group recognized the role of the other, as journalist Ali Harb wrote in November 1992.²⁸

In a feature in *An-Nahar*’s cultural supplement in December 1992, Elias Khoury voiced three main fears about this ministry of culture that “many have been talking about and that has gone through different shapes and forms.” His first fear was that the ministry would be turned into a ministry like all others, dominated by competition over its resources (that albeit would be small in the case of the ministry of culture, since it would not have a large budget). He feared, too, that the ministry would be “devoured by political sectarianism,” or be “Arabized,” that is, that the ministry would follow the model of suppressive cultural ministries in the region. Khoury was even more worried about these three points, considering that Lebanese society had become “a silent society in front of the matters it faces; a nation turned into a shareholder company,²⁹ a regional peace³⁰ negotiated because of it and no one discusses what is going on, the setting up of a second republic in the middle of silence; the story of the ministry of culture comes to add another silence to the silence,” adding that even the cultural unions that had been calling for this ministry had fallen silent. Khoury criticized this silence surrounding the formation of a ministry for cultural affairs in particular, since it implied that “intellectuals and lovers of culture” accepted the dire conditions in the cultural field, pointing to issues such as taxes imposed on theater work, censorship (“Any play, film, needs to be censored by the ministry of interior before being

shown, to make sure it does not touch religion or sects or sex or anybody; if we did not want to touch anything, then why do we write?”), infringements on copyright, lack of legal frameworks for galleries to protect the artists, and piracy, all of which needed a serious discussion.³¹ These fears show an awareness of the risk that larger state involvement in culture could backfire, curbing rather than enhancing artistic freedom. Khoury’s critique of the lack of engagement of cultural players implies the responsibility the latter have in fighting for their freedom.

In the context of an overall reform of the ministerial structure in Lebanon, a ministry of culture and higher education was eventually set up.³² In January 1993 a decree was published outlining the establishment of the ministry (Decree Nr. 3111), and on April 2, 1993, Law Nr. 215 was signed, formalizing its formation.³³ The first minister of culture, Michel Edde (1993–96), explained the decree and tried to alleviate fears by stressing that, contrary to the experiences of the ministries of culture in some “brotherly Arab countries,” Lebanon was “striving to set up a ministry for culture, not one that is . . . a ministry to direct and guide culture, not one that is . . . a way to suppress creative people, artists and researchers.” Instead, the ministry should protect democratic and human values, as well as support and encourage cultural life in Lebanon. Edde added that the drafting of a cultural policy for the ministry was considered a democratic process, in which those working in the cultural field should participate. Priorities for the ministry included the setting up of a cultural infrastructure, rebuilding the national museum (for archaeology), setting up a national museum for fine arts, establishing a national theater in Beirut and in the governorates, reviving the national library in Beirut and the regions, setting up a cinémathèque, setting up cultural centers in the re-

28. Ibid.

29. Here he refers to the appropriation of downtown Beirut by the joint-stock Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District, in short, Solidere, widely opposed by intellectuals. For a discussion of this, see Tabet, *Beyrouth*.

30. This refers to the Ta’if agreement of 1989, which laid out the terms for the postwar settlement.

31. Khoury, “Culture and a Ministry of Culture.”

32. On the day the ministry of culture and higher education was announced in the official gazette on April 8, 1993, making it a legal entity,

five other ministries were also announced (ministry of technical education, ministry of social affairs, ministry of expatriates, ministry of transport, and ministry of environment).

33. “Project to Establish Ministry of Culture” (“Mashru’a ihdath wizarat lil-thaqafa”), *An-Nahar*, January 30, 1993.

gions, and strengthening the national center for music. The ministry's budget for 1993, however, was minimal.³⁴ Indeed, a cultural policy was never drafted (with or without consulting cultural players) and the priorities were never pursued, as we see from some of the critiques of the ministry published in *An-Nahar's* cultural supplement in the mid-1990s.

The Scandal of Culture in the Ministry of Culture

The first appraisal of the ministry in the cultural supplement of *An-Nahar* came in March 1994 by Lebanese intellectual Abbas Beidoun, though the title of his article already suggests what he was thinking of it: "The occasions of the ministry of culture." He starts out by stating that nobody feared the ministry any longer, since it had no ambitions in cultural life and left all cultural actors to their own devices anyway. The opinion piece ends by accusing the minister of practicing culture like people in power practice politics, through occasions and celebrations, but "encouraging writing and setting up a theatre and so on, this has neither occasion nor celebration."³⁵ He was thus lamenting the absence of plans to set up long-term infrastructures and support for culture and the arts. Criticism of the new ministry became more outspoken in 1997, when Khoury launched a dossier in *Mulhaq An-Nahar* on "the scandal of culture in the ministry of culture" to highlight the dire reality of the ministry that was still lacking a vision and administrative structure nearly five years after it was set up.³⁶ Opening the dossier with a long piece running over three full pages, Khoury takes stock of the ministry of culture, and the piece gives a good sense of the issues at stake.

The aim of the study was not to create a scandal, Khoury notes, but rather to investigate the situation on the ground. However, the conclusions he reaches are bleak. He maintains that the ministry was set up "without a thought, vision, philosophy or plan. It was set up like that, to com-

plete numbers, and it remained like that." Khoury points out that all the discussions about culture that had taken place before the war were suddenly ignored, such as the idea of a national council that some had advocated for. Forgotten, too, was the necessity of conducting a preliminary study defining the priorities of Lebanese culture after the rupture the war had caused. Khoury writes that the intellectuals and cultural players had been waiting for a cultural conference where the plans of the ministry would be discussed, or at least for a press conference in which priorities would be defined, but they waited in vain. No comprehensive vision for the meaning of culture in Lebanon after the war was proposed, and the first minister of culture allowed the ministry to be transformed into "one of the employment sectors, the Lebanese way." The ministry was set up without a structure, and continued to be without one, and was rather being based on "chaos, decisions of advisors and political interests." Personnel were chosen because of political and family considerations, starting with the appointment of the director general. Instead of permanent staff, temporary staff and advisers were employed. There was a complete lack of criteria and distribution of responsibilities, including on the level of financial assistance (which was often based on political considerations) and on the level of acquisitions and inventories (paintings, books). The fact that the ministry had no structure allowed the minister and director general to "act in their own discretion," without oversight or accountability.³⁷

Under Minister Edde, the "moderate attempts to set up a thing called ministry of culture clashed with conflicting interests, and the absence of a structure and plan," Khoury writes, while under the next minister, Fawzi Hobeiche (1996–98), nepotism was taken to a new level. Hobeiche dedicated two days of the week to "consultations without appointment," in other words, for receiving people from his electoral district asking for

34. "Michel Edde Explains and Clarifies: It [the Ministry] Will Not Direct Culture and Tame Creativity" ("Mishal Edde yashrah wa yuwadah: lan takun li-tawjih al-thaqafa wa tadjin al-mabd'ain"), *An-Nahar*, February 18, 1993. The 1993 budget was 21 million Lebanese pounds, of which 6 million were designated

for culture and 15 million for higher education, adding up to only 1 of 100,000 of the total budget for the year; in 1993, the value of the Lebanese pound was at around 1,700 to the US dollar, before it got pegged to the dollar at roughly 1,500 in 1997.

35. Beidoun, "The Occasions of the Ministry of Culture."

36. Khoury, "The Scandal of Culture."

37. Ibid.

services. In a sarcastic tone, Khoury writes: “We say that there is nothing wrong. This is the Lebanese system. It is not a problem. Culture can take a rest on Mondays and Thursdays, and leave space for the people of the minister’s electoral district. . . . But what do we do when we discover that there is no place for culture in the ministry of culture? Can we turn our heads and say, it’s ok?” Khoury’s point is that culture does not support being caught in the middle of administrative chaos. Of course the ministry of culture is not worse than other ministries, he acknowledges. It is not the only one suffering from chaos and conflicts of interest, “but the difference is that culture does not support this,” since it is not a service but a matter of heritage and thought that does not resemble the “paving of roads” from which contractors can benefit. He wonders whether the old regime before Ta’if knew of this difference, “that is why they did not struggle to do the impossible mission that is the setting up of a ministry of culture in the middle of a corrosive administration.”³⁸

So why did they decide to set up this ministry? Khoury explains that “someone involved told [him] that the setting up of a ministry became possible after Ta’if, because the reason that prevented the setting up of a ministry, namely the differences over Lebanon’s identity, ceased to exist after Lebanon’s Arabness was enshrined in the constitution.” However, a ministry was established, and they “discovered that the problem was not Lebanon’s identity, but the identity of authority.” He concludes that the issue was neither identity nor a question of intentions, but the structure of the state. When “they decided to set up a ministry of culture on the model of other ministries, we did something wrong,” namely, “subjugating to the logic that turns public money into a means for domination, not a right for the people.” Cultural production needed a coherent structure, Khoury continued, that facilitated planning for it and provided it with financial support, so that it could grow and flourish. When the ministry was set up, intellectuals had been afraid of control and “political hegemony” over culture; they later realized how naive they had been, the ministry being only a new depart-

ment in the “aging Lebanese administration.” Khoury ends his article with a plea to leave culture alone: “There are countless ministries. . . . But why culture?!”³⁹

Khoury’s “scandal of culture” piece elaborates a number of valid critiques of the new ministry, in particular the absence of a clear vision and structure, including human resources of which the ministry suffers until today, and the lack of communication between the ministry and cultural players. His cynical style underlines the distance he as a public intellectual feels from the ministry, while at the same time emphasizes that the way the ministry turned out was also their—the intellectuals’—responsibility (“we did something wrong”). While not giving up on the idea that a clear structure provided by the state would facilitate cultural production, the piece leaves no hope that the existing state administration could deliver a supportive environment. Khoury was one of the main public intellectuals challenging the state in the 1990s. He joined *An-Nahar* as editor of its cultural supplement after having been editor of the cultural pages of *Al-Safir* (1983–90) and, with his staunchly pro-Palestinian stance, was not a natural fit in *An-Nahar*. However, the cultural supplement provided him with a platform with which to challenge the state over issues such as the memory of the war and state-sponsored amnesia,⁴⁰ the reconstruction of downtown Beirut, or public support of culture, as discussed above. He did not call for outright revolution but rather for reformation of the system, for which everyone was responsible.

In another piece as part of the same dossier, Nicolas al-Nammar reaffirms Khoury’s point that the malaise lies in the system of government in Lebanon, wondering whether the ministry of culture that was established because of special circumstances (the reconstruction process after Ta’if) was now a “candidate for cancellation.” He asks whether one should not in fact hope for its cancellation. Nammar was part of the 1971 meeting in the UNESCO Palace in his function as dean of the institute of fine arts at the time, where he, together with Edmond Naim, pledged against the setting up of a ministry and even against the set-

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Haugbolle, *War and Memory*, 75.

ting up of a council for culture, fearing it would fall under what he calls the “hegemony of the snobs and salon ladies” in the country, which refers to the elites and members of high society running many cultural institutions in the country. Rather, “they believed and still believe that the best way to protect cultural production was through free civil institutions such as syndicates and cultural associations financially supported by governmental/public institutions.” Edde had assured Nammar that they would appoint committees consisting of cultural players to be the links among cultural producers and the ministry in all fields. However, after five years not a single such committee had been appointed, and “the purchase of art and literary work, theatre productions and the giving of grants were subject to the mood of advisors and temporary staff at the ministry, and to the interference of politicians, salon people and influential people.”⁴¹

The 1997 dossier on the ministry of culture in the cultural supplement highlighted the dissociation of the ministry from the cultural field, being reduced to a tool in the hands of politics.⁴² The hope for the ministry to increase a sense of citizenship and lay the foundations for a right to culture had turned into disappointment.

Freedom and Citizenship

As discussed above, there was a lively debate about the state’s involvement in cultural production among cultural players and intellectuals in the early 1970s in Lebanon. While some artists and cultural producers voiced their reservations, conscious of the experiences in other regional countries where the state came to dominate culture, the general consensus as presented in *An-Nahar* and *L’Orient* seemed to be in favor of setting up a ministry. The hope for this ministry was to improve cultural infrastructures and provide financial support while at the same time ensuring artistic freedom. While nothing came of the proposed ministry, there were channels of participation and discussion in place for putting down a vision for culture. What is noticeable in the debate of 1971 is the link

between the proposed ministry and the question of citizenship and rights. The establishment of a ministry for culture was considered an important signal and symbol for artists and cultural players that their concerns were taken seriously, making them feel more like citizens.

At the same time, the principle of freedom of culture was nominally put at the core of Lebanon’s cultural policy during this period. Joseph Abou-Rizk, head of the fine arts department of the Lebanese Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts, writes in this vein in his study of cultural policies in Lebanon (written in the 1970s and published in 1981): “We note that in Lebanon cultural policies are based on the principle of freedom of culture, which means on the principle of non-intervention of authority in the orientation of the cultural movement. This gives the first impression that the Lebanese state has no cultural policy, whereas what it does in this field is in complete harmony with the principle of the integration of the people and authority.”⁴³ Abou-Rizk argues that this integration becomes clear by looking at the tasks the state has focused on (including the preservation and accessibility of monuments; promoting Lebanese literary, philosophical, and historical works; promoting cultural exchanges; encouraging talent and individual and collective cultural initiatives; taking care of youth matters and popular cultural movements; and promoting handicrafts), the structure that the state has created to execute these tasks (including artistic institutions such as the national institute for music; the institute for fine arts; and administrative institutions such as the general directorate of antiquities; the department of the national library; the ministry of information; the general directorate of tourism; the national commission for education, science, and culture [UNESCO]; the national commission of museums; and the house of Lebanese artisans), the means used by the state to reach its cultural objectives (such as awards; supporting institutions and private associations; and “creating a climate favorable to the blossoming of creative talents”), and the re-

41. Al-Nammar, “Is the Ministry of Culture a Candidate.”

42. It also included articles focusing specifically on the granting of aid (such as Khoury’s article from October 1997 titled “The Scandal of the

Billion Lira”) and on the interplay between politics and culture.

43. Abou-Rizk, *La Politique Culturelle*, 30.

sults to which these policies have led. Abou-Rizk is convinced that “freedom is the source of creativity in Lebanon and that the state, that respects this freedom and only works towards its fulfilment, knows exactly what it wants.”⁴⁴ However, the discussion around establishing a ministry of culture has made it clear that there was a gap between what he refers to as cultural policies being in “complete harmony with the principle of the integration of the people and authority” and how the situation was perceived by cultural players.

From the point of view of a state employee, perhaps, Lebanon’s pre-1990s cultural policies were based on the principle of freedom, giving cultural players the space they needed; however, cultural players felt neglected by the state and were looking for stronger institutional support and recognition of their rights. The tasks, structures, and means the state employed as laid out by Abou-Rizk were considered ineffective. Intellectuals and cultural players wanted a unified institution representing all, one that was separate from the ministry of education and was able to invest in culture (although opponents to the ministry project rightly questioned whether the state actually had money to spend on culture). They wanted an institution that made them feel like citizens.

“They” versus “Us”

In the 1990s, despite promises by Minister Edde that the formulation of a cultural policy would be a “democratic process,” cultural players felt completely sidelined in the process. While their hope for a ministry of culture had turned into skepticism, they wanted a better structure to enable cultural production, including better fiscal legislation and financial support. Here the intellectuals also had a role to play in voicing their demands and holding the ministry accountable. Khoury asked: “Is culture able to remain outside the public right for public money? Can public money in Lebanon remain dependent on small politics? Or do the intellectuals have a role in holding the ministry accountable, and to criticize it, and subject it to con-

stant and strict control, so that the idea of culture is not wasted, but becomes a part of the Lebanese composition?”⁴⁵

Cultural players had to take responsibility for the situation of culture in the country. In his deliberations on the ministry of culture, Khoury clearly distinguishes between “them” (or “you”) and “us” (or “we”), the former being the authorities (also referred to as “the people of Ta’if”), the latter the intellectuals and artists on whose behalf Khoury claims to speak. Both sides are responsible for the cultural landscape, as becomes clear in the quotation above where he points out the intellectuals’ responsibility to hold the ministry accountable. What is missing is a larger “us,” one that includes policy makers and cultural players. “They” and “us,” in Khoury’s discussion of the ministry of culture, are at diametrically opposed ends. “They ignored everything [that was discussed before the war], and ended up setting up a ministry of culture and higher education *for us*. And *we* waited,” he writes about the process of setting up a ministry. He even goes so far as to say that it was impossible for politicians to draw up a cultural policy, when “Lebanese culture was born outside *them* and against *them*.”⁴⁶ Others reinforced this notion that decision makers and intellectuals held a mutually exclusive relationship.⁴⁷

This perceived gulf between state authorities and cultural players remains today; cultural players often position themselves against the state, in which they have lost faith. This positioning is exemplified by the work of graphic designer Jana Traboulsi, in her series of works that was triggered by the garbage crisis in Lebanon in the summer of 2015, including “What Do You Mean There Is No State,” “We Are, You Are,” and “You Have, We Have.” Countering the often-used phrase “Where Is the State?” (*wayn ad-dawla*), which implies that there is no (effective) state in Lebanon, she expresses her and her fellow protesters’ anger at the corruption of the state, the inability to provide basic public services, the privatization of public property, and the use of force against protesters.

44. Ibid., 70.

46. Ibid., my emphasis.

47. Harb, “A Ministry for Culture.”

45. Khoury, “The Scandal of Culture.”

Traboulsi writes, “Now, at this historical moment of the country’s movements and struggle, I am now part of an ‘us.’ We take back *our* streets, sea and forests, and *we* leave *them* the walls, the parking meters, and the gates and their locks. *They* divide the profits of *their* bids and illegally extend *their* government power. We have legitimacy and people power.”⁴⁸ The notion of “they” versus “us” has only become stronger following the garbage crisis and ensuing protests against the political and economic corruption in the country. One positive outcome of the crisis has been the formation of new movements that challenge the political system from within, such as the Beirut Madinati (Beirut My City) campaign running in the Beirut municipal elections in 2016 and contesting the traditional political elites.⁴⁹

In 2008, a number of new laws concerning the ministry of culture were passed, reforming the ministry—at least on paper. There had been no major development on the legal level since the ministry was formed in 1993, with the exception of Law Nr. 247 of 2000, which separated higher education from the ministry of culture, turning what started as the ministry of culture and higher education into the ministry of culture as it stands today. The ministry remained without a formal structure (lamented by Elias Khoury) until Law Nr. 35 was passed in October 2008, outlining the governance structure of the ministry and explicitly stating that the latter was in charge of drawing up general cultural policies and coordinating their implementation (Article 2). Law Nr. 36 of the same year defined public institutions under the ministry; Law Nr. 37 dealt with cultural properties and Law Nr. 56 with the structure of artistic professions, in particular artist unions.⁵⁰ In September 2014, two decrees were passed (Decrees Nr. 622 and 624) defining the working mechanisms for the general directorates under the ministry of culture. Now it will be a question of translating these laws and regulations into practice. This remains a challenge, considering not only the continuous lack of a bud-

get to expand the human resources and move away from handing out temporary contracts on a yearly basis, but also the lack of awareness—on both the level of the public and the independent sector—of the laws regulating culture.

Pushing the Status Quo

So what does the above mean for the relationship of artists and cultural players to authority today? Can institutional structures possibly be liberating? Institutional structures and public institutions, when functioning, can certainly have an enabling function, providing much-needed goods such as spaces and other infrastructures, financial support, and legislation. This was the hope of cultural players advocating for a ministry in the early 1970s. However, the debate of the mid-1990s clearly shows that the Lebanese ministry of culture during the first five years of its existence had no such liberating qualities. It is easy to see the reasons why cultural players were pushing the status quo on both occasions we considered—asking for a ministry of culture in 1971, and wondering whether it should be cancelled in the mid-1990s. The malaise of the state administration in the field of culture still persists, coupled with a fragmentation on the level of civil society. Twenty-five years after the ministry of culture was set up, most of the priorities listed by the first minister of culture in the early 1990s—such as setting up a cultural infrastructure, setting up a national museum for fine arts, establishing a national theater, and reviving the national library—have still not been realized.

In his article “Culture as Resistance,” Lebanese critic Pierre Abi Saab writes about culture as a means of resistance in a globalized world, resistance against colonialism and occupation, and resistance against the transformation of society into a soulless consumer society. He pleads for the need to restore an awareness that brings cultural production back into the public sphere. After the civil war, he argues, Beirut could have taken up the role it played in the 1950s, that of a “democratic

48. Traboulsi, “You Have, We Have,” my emphasis.

49. Beirut Madinati website, accessed July 10, 2017, beirutmadinati.com [in Arabic].

50. A number of these laws were in fact drawn up in the early 2000s (under Minister of Culture Ghassan Salamé) but were not passed until 2008 because of political paralysis. To view

copies of these laws, see “Laws,” *Cultural Policies in Lebanon* (blog), accessed June 11, 2017, cpl.hypotheses.org/laws.

oasis and a place for cultural production,”⁵¹ but it did not resume its place as a cultural laboratory since the 1990s. To build a cultural life and make it become part of everyday life was a political task.⁵² This task includes setting up local channels of funding and building new audiences and infrastructures to create a supportive environment for cultural production. As long as the state is not providing this support, other players will fill the void. This allows artists and intellectuals to produce freely—to the extent the agenda of the supporting side allows for—but does not have liberating qualities if there is no long-term infrastructural support. More important, it neither recognizes artists’ rights nor acknowledges them as citizens.

The debates around establishing a ministry of culture in Lebanon have taken place in the regional context of strong state support of culture, usually coupled with control and censorship, and show how, despite the regional examples, the concept of larger state involvement in culture did not necessarily need to be linked to greater control and loss of freedom. Beyond the region, the debates highlight a number of points about citizenship and liberation in relation to cultural players and authority. The idea of a ministry of culture was linked to the recognition of artists as citizens, while at the same time artists, intellectuals, and cultural players had a responsibility to uphold their rights and ensure their freedom. Emancipation from a passive blaming to an active and constructive shaping was thus in a way a prerequisite to liberation.

We can see steps in this direction in the current Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche, launched in 2013. Civil society actors have taken it into their own hands to save one of Beirut’s last remaining publicly accessible seafront territories from construction and privatization, and they are doing so by lobbying all responsible public actors. The campaign has already successfully convinced the ministry of environment to prepare a draft law to categorize Dalieh as a natural site. Volunteers are also putting pressure on the

ministry of culture to protect Dalieh as a natural landmark as well as on the municipality to deny any building permissions.⁵³ As a result of this activism, Dalieh was put on the World Monument Watch list in 2016, thereby raising awareness on an international level about the need to protect it and creating a tool for pressure at home.⁵⁴ While the campaign is ongoing and its outcome not yet determined, it shows the latest demands on public institutions: protection, legislation, and investing in the public good over private gain. The campaign reflects a larger trend in cultural policies, where cultural players are taking the initiative and asserting pressure on public bodies. A public institution such as the ministry of culture cannot be a mere bureaucratic affair; it must be discussed, challenged, and held accountable in order to play a vital role in the cultural life of the country. ■■■■

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51. Abi Saab, “Kultur ist Widerstand,” 132.

52. *Ibid.*, 134.

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