Supporting peacebuilding in Syria through universities: The role of cultural heritage

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Abstract

Syria's population is made up of a diverse range of ethnicities and religions, as is its cultural heritage. Using a mixed research methodology of interviews and questionnaires to gather data from students and professors of Syrian universities, this article examines the possibility of teaching Syrian heritage within a university curriculum to support the promotion of civil peace in Syria, by foregrounding its diversity.

Key Words

Universities

Syria

Peacebuilding

Cultural heritage

Introduction

Syria has an impressive ethnic and religious diversity: Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen, Circassians, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Yazidis, but their common denominator is their Syrian identity (Al-Azm, 2017: 92). Given this diversity, it is possible that the common ground on which all Syrians can agree is a shared cultural heritage. As a result, we felt that this heritage could be taught as a topic in peace education at universities and based on similar global experiences, where there are examples that illustrate the contribution of cultural heritage in supporting civil peace in post-conflict situations (Milton, 2017). For example, community peace museums were established to promote a culture of peace and co-existence among all parties that were involved in conflict in different regions of Kenya (Somjee, 2017). Hence, this paper will suggest some ways that heritage education in Syrian universities might contribute to sustainable peacebuilding.

This paper draws on perspectives of academics and university students in Syrian universities, using a mixed methodology during 2018–2019 as the violent conflict was ongoing. The aim was to investigate heritage foci, in the form of historic Syrian sites and figures, which have the potential be utilised in building an inclusive curriculum which draws on aspects of the Syrian past to build a post-conflict future.

Cultural heritage, higher education and peacebuilding

The conflict in Syria has been traumatic for all Syrians, and dramatically destabilised the region, reinforcing ethnic, sectarian, and class divisions

(Al-Azm, 2017). Since 2011, the conflict has also adversely affected the provision of higher education (HE), exacerbating social divisions among students from various sectarian groups and ethnic minorities as well as economic and gender inequalities (Milton, 2019: 42). Achieving peace and reconciliation is essential in countries where civil wars have divided the society, but current discussions on how to create a space for peace and reconciliation in Syria do not sufficiently account for the potential of Syrian universities.

It has been argued that it is important 'to re-establish and enhance a sense of Syrian national identity as a principal way towards reconciliation and stability' (Al-Azm, 2017: 92). A Syrian identity based on shared cultural heritage can become a 'common denominator' in an otherwise fragmented cultural landscape (Al-Azm, 2017: 91-92). Investing in building this identity provides the potential to leave aside the racial, religious or tribal affinities, and builds on a common shared history. It has been suggested, for example, that sites such as Palmyra offer a 'neutral foundation on which to rebuild a fractured identity' (Lostal and Cunliffe, 2016: 254).

The explosion of armed violence and extremism, a culture of fear, polarisation and the abolition of the other in the Syrian crisis has led to the tragic neglect of the Syrian heritage. We believe it is possible to use heritage and cultural diversity as the basis for reconciliation and development that benefits everyone. This is possible through HE, despite the challenges faced by Syrian universities (Cara, 2019). It is recognised that universities are only one part of a larger nexus needed for heritage to support peacebuilding, which should also include other facets of society, such as community engagement and work with schools (Little and Shackel, 2016), but the aim of this research is to suggest ways through which heritage could contribute to peacebuilding through peace education in university settings (Oueijan, 2018).

The importance of Syrian heritage to Syrian identity has been noted (see Cunliffe *et al.*, 2012; Al-Azm, 2017), as has the way Syrian heritage can encourage a sense of belonging in local communities (Loosley, 2005). The experiences of the authors in Syrian universities, and supported by our findings presented here, is that heritage is not considered a significant area of teaching and learning in Syrian HE although it might form a useful basis for reconstruction if introduced. It has the potential to emphasise unity, connections, and commonalities rather than divisions. Syrian cultural heritage has a diversity of objects, places, and historical figures which might be utilised to help shape renewed national identity (Somjee, 2017) in an equitable and just manner to promote a peaceful Syrian society. In other global contexts, it has been shown that cultural heritage might be utilised to produce new national narratives (Zetterstrom-Sharp, 2015) and universities are an appropriate and critical venue for their production, where approaches to peacebuilding through heritage can be evaluated (for example, Little and Shackel (2016) demonstrate a model whereby particular heritage sites can serve to promote conflict resolution).

In a university context, in order to utilise cultural heritage for the aim of building peaceful civil society, the first steps involve the design and provision of inclusive heritage curricula, which builds awareness of shared cultural heritage. Our project aimed to identify the aspects of Syrian heritage which might create a strong foundation for inclusion of heritage in the curriculum, looking particularly at historical figures and sites. The aim was also to build a Syrian society which uses its historical ethnic and sectarian diversity as the basis for an identity which takes pride in its contemporary diversity as a strength and thus promotes mutual respect and coexistence.

Methodology

This research investigates the potential for universities to utilise diverse yet shared Syrian heritage to support the promotion of civil peace. The research was conducted during the ongoing crisis, between November 2018 and May 2019, in the North of Syria. The research was carried out by exiled Syrian academics in Turkey who could have access to the field only from their current location. However, one member of the team travelled into Syria to collect the data, which was collected from university students using a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with academics who share their perspectives about the importance of teaching cultural heritage in HE. The research aimed to identify a list of archaeological sites and historical figures which were important to a broad range of Syrians with different ethnic and religious identities. Cultural sites and historical figures were chosen

for this pilot study as they are recognisable to all Syrians even if they might not be familiar to the term 'heritage' (turath), which is a concept recently introduced in the region. The questionnaire was distributed in Al-Sham University and Free Aleppo University to 150 students but only 100 were returned (62 males and 38 females). The sample represented Arts and Humanities (5), Economic and Administration (11), Engineering (30), Law (23), Religious Studies (9), Education (6), Agriculture (2), and Nursing (14). Interviews were conducted with 9 academics (7 males and 2 females) in the same institutions representing Arts and Humanities (2), Economic and Administration (2), Engineering (1), Education (3) and Political science (1). The students surveyed represented different regions of Syria, as many did not originate from the location of the universities where they were attending. Of them, 44 percent were internally displaced, and the rest were more local to the region. These surveys and interviews allowed the researchers to identify the historical figures and sites that might be used to underpin a curriculum of shared heritage which could contribute to heal the political and ethnic/religious divisions in Syria.

Informed by previous studies, we designed a mixed research methodology to study Syrian university students and professors who represent an important constituency of the Syrian society and have the potential to shape social values through research, teaching and learning. We asked academics to reflect on the importance of cultural heritage in building civil peace, and ways of strengthening the role of universities through its inclusion in university courses. The student questionnaire was designed as multiple-choice so that a greater sample of students could be surveyed, while the academic interviews involved open-ended questions to gain a deeper understanding of their accumulated educational experience.

The most important challenges faced by the researchers were the security conditions, as well as the lack of awareness of some students and academics of the importance of this subject under the circumstances in which they lived in those areas. To overcome this problem, the researchers explained the reasons for undertaking study, in that it aimed to support peacebuilding within universities by examining the common cultural heritage in light of the ongoing war. When clarifying the aims of the

study and potential impact that the heritage can have, everyone understood the subject, and some were particularly enthusiastic about the aim of our research in promoting civil peace.

Researchers also faced the problem of lack of resources and literature on this subject because it is a new topic within Syria, where heritage studies were not an integral part of the curriculum before the conflict (See the example of the University of Aleppo, Munawar, 2019: 144). On a practical level, there was also some resistance to engaging with our research in Syria. Some academics did not initially want to be interviewed or recorded, and many students did not return the questionnaire (on such problems in research in Syrian university, see Dillabough et al., 2018).

Findings

Overall, there was good evidence that heritage was relevant to the research participants. We found that 63 percent of students had not received any formal education about Syrian cultural heritage, that there were no courses on these topics, while 37 percent answered that they had. In response to the question about the most important historical figures or sites, on a scale of 1–5, students answered a mean of 3.2 that heritage is of importance in building human values. Similarly, on a scale of 1–5, students responded with a mean of 4.02 that and heritage had an impact on supporting Syrian national identity and was influential on Syrian people's cultural values.

Specific historical figures who had an impact on Syrian history were chosen for those that could be considered unifying irrespective of their diverse social and cultural identities. The possible answers were as comprehensive and varied as possible, with the historical figures including ancient poets, politicians, military commanders, and doctors. As discussed below with regards to historical sites, the possible answers to the important historical figures were from across different regions throughout Syria and periods of the Syrian history.

Students ranked historical figures and sites, and those which received greatest approval from students were as below. These are examples of figures from different period, ethnicities and religions:

One of the most widely acclaimed personalities is Mohammed Al-Maghout, a writer and novelist who lived in the 20th century. Most of his literary work
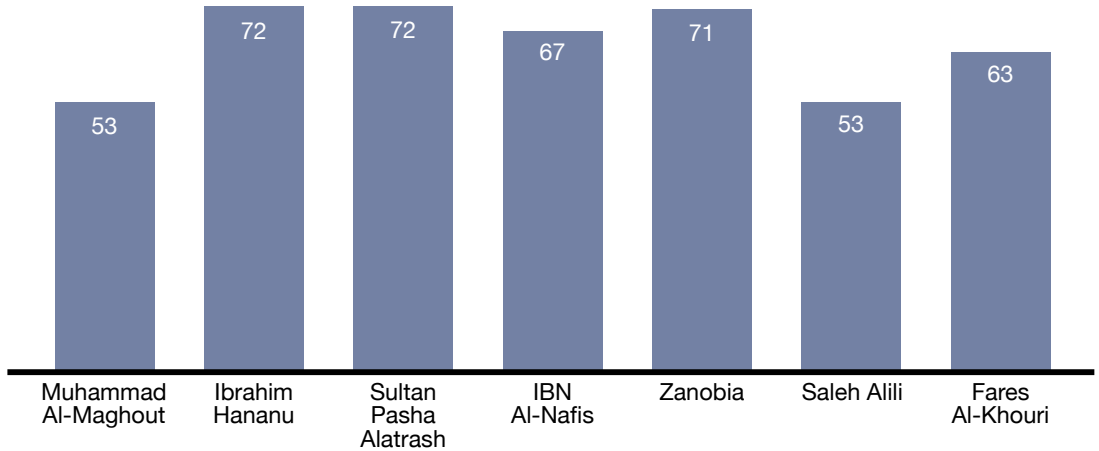
Figure 1. Students' ranking of historical figures and sites

has been transformed into plays that have gained great popularity among Syrians. Ibrahim Hanano, who also lived in the 20th century and had a role in confronting the French occupation, as did Nizar Qabbani, one of the most famous poets of Syria in the 20th century. For the ancient figures, Zenobia was renowned as queen of the Kingdom of Tadmur (Palmyra) as well as Ibn al-Nafis, a Syrian doctor who lived in the Islamic era and was the discoverer of the micro-circulation. This range shows that despite surveying students from different sects and regions, the students chose a wide range of historical figures from a variety of different sects which did not necessarily correspond to their own. It is therefore possible to say that the students did care about archaeological artifacts and the effects regardless of their belonging to a specific ethnic or religious

group, expressing their desire to live together in a diverse Syria. They chose personalities of different orientations, political views, literary traditions, social classes, and both ancient and modern.

We also note the existence of a consensus on the personalities who played a key role in political resistance against Western colonialism and a large percentage of the students surveyed agreed upon the historical figures who had a role in unifying Syrians such as, Zenobia, Khalid Bin Al Waleed, Salah Al Waleed Aldin, Yousef Al-Azamah, and Ibrahim Hanano. The same level of agreement also applies to the historic sites. The places surveyed, dating from eras ranging from prehistory to early Christianity and the Islamic era, belonged to different sects and ethnicities. Below are the most important places that were selected by the students:
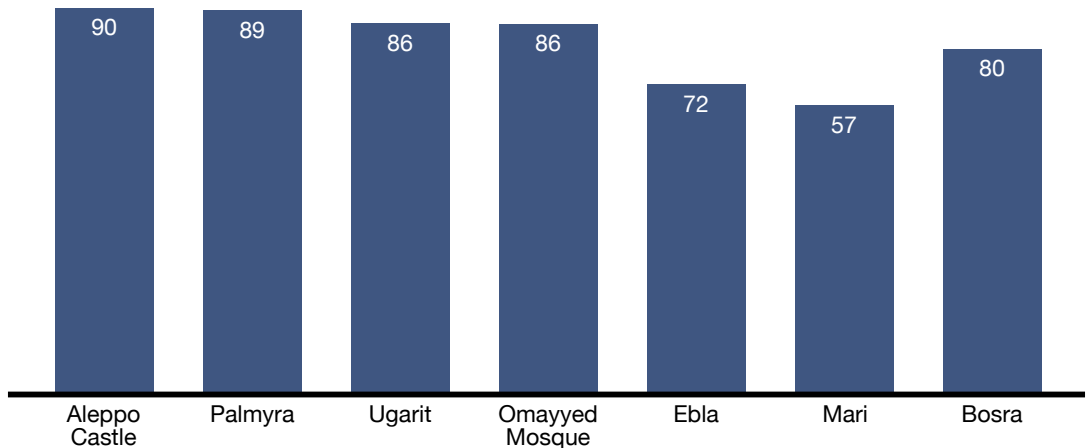

Figure 2. Participants' ranking of most important heritage sites

The importance of the citadel of Aleppo is evident for the students, but it is notable that many other places not in the same region were also considered important. For example, Palmyra, Mari, Ebla and Bosra, all dating to pre-Islamic times, as well as Islamic monuments such as Umayyad Mosques in Damascus and Aleppo were indicated by many students as important heritage sites. This demonstrates that the students did not have a preference in their conception of Syrian heritage between modern and ancient, Islamic or non-Islamic, but they had pride in a diversity of sites within Syria as a whole.

In the questionnaire, students were asked what characters they wanted to be in a cultural heritage curriculum. They suggested the names of some of the personalities and places which they wish to see included in the university's cultural heritage curricula, such as Shukri al-Quwatli, Zulubiya and Yusuf al-Azmah, as well as places, such as the ruins of Aleppo and Ebla.

Interestingly, our research found that there was a relative lack of awareness among academics about Syrian common heritage. However, they were open to teaching heritage through their curriculum. They also emphasised the potential role of heritage in building civil peace through celebration of common historical images which were not based on ethnic or religious backgrounds. Where all academics agreed that there were important Muslim figures, Christian figures such as, Fares al-Khoury Christian were also popular. They also agreed on figures such as Zenobia; the common factor for figures seems to be that they are historical examples of Syrian power, independence, and resistance to external rule.

Given the geographical and cultural diversity of heritage which Syrians identified as meaningful in this study, we believe there is the potential for heritage education to form a collective basis of promoting civil peace. Despite the destruction of social fabrics in Syria due to the civil war, Syrians still hold a sense of pride in a wide range of historical sites and historical figures that belonged to different sects and nationalities. We can enhance this spirit among students through the heritage curricula to reclaim a common national identity among diverse groups of Syrians.

Figure 3. Locations of important heritage sites

Historical figures are an important part of people's culture. As is shown by the questionnaire results, Syrians are proud of the personalities from different sects and affiliations because they represent a common cultural heritage that reveals coexistence and harmony in the Syrian society. The figures perceived to be most important to Syrian academics and students are those who had a prominent role in bringing the Syrians together or had a role in resisting colonialism, such as Zenobia, Khalid ibn al-Walid, Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi and Pasha al-Atrash. At the same time, universities have a role to play in supporting the value system in which the cultural heritage can play an important role.

The Syrian experiment relied on the selection of archaeological sites regardless of ethnic, religious or regional affiliation. In Syria, cultural heritage has not always been viewed as positive by all people, due to its imperialistic use by European archaeologists and its use in service of the regime (Gillot, 2010: 9). Our research shows that there is potential in utilising cultural heritage in a positive way through promotion of common Syrian figures and historical sites.

Conclusion

This research shows that Syrian cultural heritage is important to academics and students and is key to their identity and belonging. By assuring students and academics that cultural heritage sites and historical figures represent the heritage of Syria as a whole, we also suggest that it is important to pay attention to the dissemination of knowledge of Syrian cultural heritage sites and shared memory. University curricula could enable this by utilising shared heritage to contribute to the creation of a common national identity among university students, which could eventually help contribute to the consolidation of civil peace in Syria. The importance of teaching cultural heritage has potential to rebuild a post-war society, by focusing on heritage which promotes narratives of tolerance and shared past, which can also enable the rebuilding of trust in the society.

Heritage is a source of identity and social cohesion in societies facing confusing transformations and instability, and teaching cultural heritage has the potential to promote an open, inclusive and pluralistic society by contributing to a sense of shared citizenship and collective identity.

Heritage and inclusive education can also help lay the foundations for the development of a vibrant society. The inclusion of heritage in university education also looks towards the future, in building a generation that is aware of its heritage, and thus could contribute to preservation of cultural and historical identity for future generations. In order to do this, it is crucial to draw on online resources and bibliographies, or via workshops on Syria's cultural heritage, to enable academics to include relevant teaching materials on cultural heritage. Cooperation with international universities with expertise in this field can benefit Syrian universities to establish heritage education as an important discipline for research, teaching and learning. This small-scale research reveals some encouraging results to this direction. There is, however, need for much broader research around how heritage education in universities could be advanced and promoted as a means to peacebuilding in post-war Syria.

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