

<b>Institution:</b> Brunel University London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 33 Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Changing attitudes towards conflict and sustainable peace in Lebanon		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 09/2016 – 06/2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Daniele Rugo	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Reader – Film and TV Practice	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 09/2013 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2018 – 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

The Lebanese Civil War saw 250,000 people dead, 1,000,000 displaced and 17,000 still missing today. After the war ended in 1990, there were no plans to address the trauma and reintegrate militiamen back into society. Dr Daniele Rugo's documentary film *About a War* is being used by local NGOs in Lebanon as a peace-building and conflict prevention tool. Audiences who have watched the film have expressed a change in their attitude towards the war. The screenings offer communities a way to share unaddressed traumas and common experiences of suffering. Young people involved in armed violence find in the ex-fighters – recruited as teenagers through ideology or poverty – stories that echo their own. Since the war is not part of the curriculum, the film has also become an educational tool and is being used by teachers in schools to present a multi-perspective view. Students have expressed a change in their attitudes towards their understanding of the past as central to sustainable peace in their country.

### 2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

The Lebanese Civil War ended 30 years ago. However, to this day, Lebanon lacks a shared national narrative over the conflict and a state-enforced amnesia curtails a full reconciliation. The research by Dr Rugo (then, Senior Lecturer) addressed the war's long-term impacts on the infrastructure of Beirut and its people by interrogating experiences of ex-fighters who turned the city into a weapon. In doing so the research also examined the narrativization of conflict by former combatants, therefore addressing and questioning the victim/perpetrator binary.

Dr Rugo has considerable expertise in the use of filmmaking as a research tool. Through his scholarly and practice-led work he has developed a body of research that builds on and expands filmmaking's ability not simply to communicate research findings, but to be used as a research method in itself, through its ability to capture the experiential and everyday dimensions of human interactions.

Through the use of filmmaking, the research investigated the institutional silence over the war as contributing to the civil conflict's lasting impacts. This was done in particular through the testimonies of former combatants, whose integration back into society has never been completed. The research addressed how combatants reflect today on their own experiences and the potential these testimonies have to contribute to peace-building. In this sense then, the research is also intended as an exploration of 'testimony' as a cornerstone of documentary film practices. The team conducted several extensive, open-ended interviews with militiamen,

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allowing these to frame the narrativization of their memories and offering and triggering a number of reflections on so-called perpetrator films. What happens to the testimony when the one speaking is not a victim? What happens to the tenets of documentary practice when we hear the voice of the perpetrator? Importantly, the testimony of combatants is deemed crucial to deal with the past and has proven very effective in changing attitudes towards past wars, in particular among those people who are presently at risk of engaging in armed conflict.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

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Daniele Rugo & Abi Weaver, *About a War*, 2018, Feature-Length Documentary Film.

Dr Daniele Rugo (PI). Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/N00812X/1), September 2016 - June 2018, '*Following the wires: sensing socio-material practices of everyday electricity supply in post-conflict Greater Beirut*', GBP77,368

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

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The research produced a documentary film – *About a War* - bringing together ex-fighters from different sides. During the Lebanese Civil War, 250,000 people were killed, 1,000,000 displaced and 17,000 people went missing. Thousands of teenagers picked up arms to fight in the 15-year war that tore the nation apart. In 1990, the Taif agreement brought the war to a close, integrating warring parties into a power sharing government. With an amnesty pardoning all crimes against civilians and no plans to reintegrate militiamen back into society, many fighters became anonymous, silent and were left to disappear into a society ravaged by internal strife. Moving through the testimonies of Assad, a right wing Christian intelligence officer; Ahed, a Palestinian refugee fighter and Nassim, a Communist commander, *About a War* unpicks the personal motivations, trauma and regret of militiamen who picked up arms during the Civil War. With no official account of the conflict, their testimonies build a multi-perspective picture of a crucial turning point in Lebanese history that radically transformed the Middle East. Nowadays, ex-fighters Ahed, Assad and Nassim work towards breaking cycles of violence among young people in Lebanon. While their own personal confessions delve deeper into issues of violence and politics in the Middle East, they also stand as a cautionary tale for a country that continues to be marred by inequality and sectarian divide.

The research produced the documentary film as a way to trigger dialogue around the Civil War in order to counter the widespread amnesia and learn to deal with the past, and engage through the experiences of the ex-fighters and young people who are at risk or are involved in armed conflict.

In this sense, the film does not provide merely a historical record, but uses the past as a way to address current and urgent issues. The problematic relation with past violations and violence in Lebanon has been identified as an urgent concern by several international institutions. In 2017, the International Centre for Transitional Justice recommends to 'provide the post-war generation [in Lebanon] with accurate information about the war and the negative repercussions of political violence and its impact (12) (E6). Moreover, the film tackles the lack of a public conversation around the cause and lasting legacy of the war, including the prominent unresolved trauma faced by civilians and relatives of the approximately 17,000 people who are still missing. The film responds to this and addresses the lack of an official account of the war and national narrative that would allow for a full and lasting reconciliation. In addition to this, by charting the trajectories of 3 militia fighters, the film directly addresses the issue of how young people are recruited into warfare today. In 2018, the U.N. *Report of the Secretary-General* on 'Children and armed conflict' addresses the problem of armed youth in Lebanon and documents that children

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continue to be recruited by armed groups. The 2019 update on the 2017-2020 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan directly acknowledges the report and confirms the need to act on the ongoing involvement of children in armed violence in Lebanon' (148) (E7).

The main impact of the research took place in Lebanon, and can be articulated in 2 ways: peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and education.

### Peacebuilding and conflict resolution

The film is being used by local NGOs and academic institutions as a peace-building tool, because the screenings provide a safe space where individuals can offer a testimony and communities learn what happened to the other sides and share common experiences of suffering that form the basis for a renewed cohesion. The VP of the NGO Fighters for Peace has said: "This is an excellent film. Objective and helpful. We use it as a tool for our peace-building initiatives and for the promotion of dialogues among Lebanese people in difficult areas of Beirut such as Tarek el-Jdideh and Tripoli" (E2). The trajectories offered by the ex-fighters (recruited as teenagers, fighting for 15 years, now peace-advocates) offer a model for young people who are engaged, or are at risk of becoming engaged, in armed violence, whether in Lebanon or Syria. As a political scientist/activist and teacher puts it, "Oral history [as used in the film] contributes to breaking silence and pushing towards action" (E3). The Director of the Beirut-based Centre for Lebanese Studies has said: 'the documentary reinforces the need to engage with the past,' stressing the importance of the film in challenging the institutional amnesia that prevents reconciliation and threatens to fuel more violence. Additionally, Middle East Monitor says, 'the film increases understanding of why good people commit acts of extreme violence (E4).'

### Education

The Civil War is not taught in schools; there are no textbooks because a shared narrative does not exist. Young people learn about the war only from within their own community, which reinforces antagonistic views. The film is being used by teachers and screened in schools because it presents a multi-perspective view. Following screenings of the film, students demonstrated increased awareness of the recent history of Lebanon. Students from Houssam Eddine Hariri High School in Sidon have said: "The film taught me to speak louder and harder to spread peace"; "I didn't know anything about the war. This film has changed the way I look at my country." Teachers at the school continue to use the film, which has been screened to more than 100 students (E1).

The film has been screened internationally (China, Dubai, Egypt, France, Italy, Switzerland) and has been covered by press outlets worldwide, receiving specific attention in Lebanese and pan-Arab media such as *Daily Star*, *Arab News*, *The New Arab*, *The National*, *Middle East Monitor*. The European Documentary Magazine wrote, "About a War demonstrates how understanding our history can breed solace, solidarity, and progress in a society where the past is a taboo" (E5).

The directors have been present to almost every screening and offered post-screening Q&A sessions. Often screenings have been organised in collaboration with local peace-building NGOs and have been followed by dialogue sessions with members of the audience.

In the UK, the film premiered in November 2018 to a sold-out Curzon Soho in London. A Q&A followed the screening with the directors and writer Will Self. During the Q&A many Lebanese in attendance express their views and feelings about the war. The film has toured the UK, with screenings taking place in cinemas, universities and special sessions for policy makers in various venues including Chatham House (02/2019).

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In February 2019, *About a War* was screened across Lebanon in Beirut, Sidon and Tripoli. All the screenings were sold out: over 500 people attended 4 screenings. In Tripoli, the film is screened in a café on Syria Street run by the NGO MARCH Lebanon. Syria Street is the demarcation line between 2 neighbourhoods (Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen) that have been engaged in armed violence over the last 5-6 years. The area is very problematic and the Lebanese army has now moved in with tanks to try and prevent more fighting. The audience included some current fighters from the recent conflict in Tripoli and youth who have fought recently in Syria. The post-screening discussion triggered a dialogue around the motivations behind people's decision to pick up weapons with the audience engaging with the ex-fighters' journey. Tripoli is a city where youth is particularly at risk and in its 2018 report, the UN 'verified cases of boys recruited by ISIL in and around Tripoli for trafficking into the Syrian Arab Republic' (E8).

In Sidon, the film was screened to an audience of 15-16 years old students from local high schools and the discussion centred around the future of Lebanon and how to avoid another conflict.

In Beirut, the responses to the film were very personal and intimate since it was screened to audiences who have lived through the war and, in some cases, fought in it. The Q&A turned into long conversations (up to 3 hours) about accountability, transparency and the current situation in the country. It was telling of how the war still plays an important role in people's lives.

On the basis of the research and film, Dr Rugo was invited to participate in an U.N. expert-roundtable in July 2019 on 'Operationalizing linkages between the SDG 16 and PVE agendas' (E9). *About a War* serves as a prime example for how peace-building initiatives need to include a broad set of factors (social, economic, cultural etc.), and Dr Rugo's input led to the creation of a policy brief on the relation between SDG 16 and PVE (E10).

#### *About a War* in the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut explosion

The explosion in Beirut on 4 August 2020 killed over 200 people and wounded another 6,000 and left approximately 300,000 people homeless or displaced. Many in Lebanon blame the negligence and corruption of the Lebanese political class for the explosion. Almost 3,000t of ammonium nitrate were stored in the port for over 6 years, despite the authorities receiving several warnings as to the potential danger.

The blast has refreshed the trauma of the Civil War and many people who have lived through the conflict, have re-experienced its worst days. Since the end of hostilities in 1990, the idea that the war never ended persists among the Lebanese due to ongoing political violence and with the warlords still monopolizing the memory of the conflict. The Beirut explosion is read by many as a direct manifestation of the post-war institutional violence, and culture of impunity that accompanies it. The new emergency has therefore led to a renewed interest in the unresolved legacy of the Civil War and forced many to revisit their memories. In this context *About a War* becomes a catalyst for these conversations and for an education over the conflict, which the blast has made even more urgent.

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

**E1** Corroborating letter from Teacher at Houssam Eddine Hariri High School

**E2** Corroborating letter from Vice-President of Fighters for Peace

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- E3** Documentary Reinforces the Need to Engage with the Past, Lebanese American University, 20 February 2019, <https://news.lau.edu.lb/2019/documentary-reinforces-the-need-to-engage-with-the-past.php>
- E4** About a War, *Middle East Monitor*, 30 November 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181130-about-a-war/>
- E5** Breaking the Silence about the Lebanese Civil War, *Modern Times*, 24 May 2019, <https://www.moderntimes.review/breaking-the-silence-about-the-lebanese-civil-war/>
- E6** "The War As I See It". *Youth Perceptions and Knowledge of the Lebanese Civil War*. [https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ\\_Paper\\_LebanonPhotoContest.pdf](https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ_Paper_LebanonPhotoContest.pdf).
- E7** *General Assembly Security Council, Children and Armed Conflict. Report of the Secretary General*. <https://undocs.org/en/s/2018/465>
- E8** *Report of the Secretary General on trafficking in persons in armed conflict pursuant to Security Council resolution* [https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/N1833923\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/N1833923_EN.pdf).
- E9** Two Sides of the Same Coin? Operationalizing Linkages Between the SDG 16 and PVE Agendas, *ICAN*, 22 August 2019, <https://icanpeacework.org/2019/08/22/two-sides-of-the-same-coin-operationalizing-linkages-between-the-sdg-16-and-pve-agendas/>
- E10** The SDG 16 and PVE Agendas: Different Currencies or Two Sides of the Same Coin?, *ICAN*, 2019, <http://www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SG-PVE-Policy-Brief.-Sept-2019.pdf>