

# Reflecting upon Lebanese identity

Exhibition underlines influence identification papers have had on people's lives

By **Ava Anderson**  
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**B**EIRUT: “Paper Identities,” an exhibition now up at Beit Beirut, is a philosophical exploration of notions of identity. Organized by the French Institute of the Near East (IFPO) and St. Joseph University’s Political Science Institute, the show seeks to reflect upon Lebanese identity.

The exhibition opens with quotations from Plato and Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and mixed-media canvases by Syrian artist Rabee Kiwan adorning the walls. These French and Arabic-language wall texts paint identity as an artificial construct – something thrust upon individuals for purposes of recognition, counting and categorization. “A question of identity is a question of the other,” exhibition curator, philosopher and IFPO researcher Guillaume de Vault told The Daily Star. “When someone calls you and says, ‘Who is it?’ I say, ‘It’s me.’ It’s not a question I ask for myself. It’s only an answer to others.”

While preparing “Paper Identities,” De Vault collaborated with four Lebanese researchers, including USJ political science professor Wissam Lahham.

The exhibition is split into three forms, or eras, of identity production. The first room examines social



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normalization, in which identity is informally created through speech. Written testimonials, conceptual visualizations and interactive games focus on tribal attitudes and familial roles.

The second room examines identity produced through the state’s administrative papers, sampling pieces from Lahham’s archive. Ottoman-era documents look at the circumstances of Lebanon’s creation, while government-issued identity cards reveal the Lebanese social hierarchy that the distribution of these papers themselves bolstered.

The exhibition concludes by

looking at the current digital identification on the internet and commercial and state exploitation of personal data. With the advent of usernames, identity is not only being used to recognize and classify people. It’s become a source of our most-private information.

De Vault said he began thinking about “the logic of identity” while living in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as his own sense of identity started to shift. “Before traveling, I was not French,” he said. “I was just there. I was in the place I was born and I didn’t have to justify it, and there was no difference with other people.

But then when I traveled. I began to say I am French.”

In historic and contemporary Lebanon, De Vault saw a fascinating example of the ideas he had been exploring. Though walking through the exhibit at times feels like maneuvering among the paragraphs of a philosophy paper, this room of state administrative archives injects a concrete reality and history into the abstract ideas on show in the other rooms.

To illustrate the artificiality of identity, one 1919 text, naming the people of Beirut as “Syrians,” underlines how the development of

Lebanese national identity proceeded from the distribution of new identity papers with the drawing of new borders.

“[The] idea,” as De Vault explained, “is that you can create a group based on nothing.”

To demonstrate how identity categorizes and splits people apart, we are shown photos and texts of people describing the influence identification papers have had on their lives. The display underlines how acutely people in Lebanon associate opportunity with identification. These include the benefits of a foreign passport, the limits of migrant worker status under the kafala system and the frustrations that come with statelessness.

Lahham, who has built this collection of administrative documents over 15 years, alongside his hobbies of numismatics and philately, sees great opportunity for Lebanon to grow if it can understand and confront the history that divides it.

“Lebanese have the sentiment the political regime is corrupt,” he explained ... “[It] can’t change. It will always remain as it is.”

Historical knowledge, for Lahham, is “a way to empower [Lebanese people],” and to let them understand “that the configuration that exists nowadays can change. It’s not eternal.”

Lahham has been disappointed to see few Lebanese have attended the exhibition, compared to the number of foreigners. “It’s not in my power to push Lebanese to come and visit the exhibition,” he said, “or to try to rethink their own history.”

“Paper Identities” will be at Beit Beirut until May 31.