



Handout 1: History and Historical Thinking

Session: History and Historical Thinking

Some questions to get us thinking about history:

- **What is history and why is it important?**
 “The most effective way to destroy a people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history.”¹ What does this mean? If people don’t know their origins, are they truly a people? What role does history play in shaping collective identity? What is a shared history? What role does history play in building society or in nation-building? For better or for worse, without history, could there be a nation?
- **What role does history play in our lives? How does history shape our present?**
 If history is so important, why do so many people consider it “boring”? How can history be brought to life? How can it be made relevant and meaningful? How has history shaped our present? How does history help us understand our current circumstances? What kinds of relationships do we have with history, both in educational settings and in everyday life? How can we find history in the present? What is the present? When does the present end and the past begin? What is the future?
- **What is the difference between the past and history?**
 Is history the same as the past, or is it different? Does it encompass everything before the present? Is it what happened in the past, history-as-lived, history-as-recorded, representations of the past, what is remembered, or what is written? In English, the term ‘history’² is ambiguous, as it refers to both history-as-lived (experienced and remembered) and history-as-recorded (usually in writing as a formal discipline).
- **What is memory and how is it related to history?**
 Is memory part of history or is history part of memory? How do these two concepts differ? Is what we remember history? Can we say that the past is everything that happened, while history is what we remember and what we have recorded? (In English, the term ‘history’ stands for both the past as lived and the past as recorded. Does the same apply in Arabic (al-tarikh vs. al-madi)? What do you think collective memory is? Is it the same as history?

1. Attributed to George Orwell.

2. Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (1992), 2.

