

Assaad Khairallah My Lebanon – Mosaic or Patchwork?

Three times I left Lebanon «for good», and three times I came back. This time «forever», civil war or not, and fully aware that my parents' bones were thrown out of their graves, and that mine might have the same fate, some day.

Thinking of what makes this country so repulsive at times, and so indispensable at others, I am baffled by the abiding conflicts that have shaped its history, stifling, almost destroying it, and injecting it with creative energy whenever they are brought into a *modus vivendi*.

History being the fourth dimension of geography, much can be explained by Lebanon's physical and human geography and by the internal and external demographic developments.

The Seesaw of Balance

It is hard to believe that such a tiny land (four times smaller than Switzerland) could have such huge historical and cultural dimensions. Lebanon's present is the tip of the iceberg of 7000 years of interaction with its geopolitical environment, where its geographic position has made it an almost unavoidable corridor; successive conquerors subdued its narrow coast and Beqaa plain and their immediate surroundings. They each left their mark as well as some population that gradually became part of the Lebanese canvas. Additionally, its western chain of mountains, with some peaks over 3000 m high, has been a natural refuge for minorities from the whole re-

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gion, fleeing oppression, and struggling to preserve ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences.

Throughout its long history, the Lebanese pool developed a spirit of reconciliation and compromise that revolutionary ideologists

usually denigrate as the Phoenician mercantile character. Yet this spirit helped the Phoenicians (1) build what was possibly the first federation in the world between their city-states, and (2) peacefully spread their colonies around the Mediterranean.

Yet Phoenician sovereignty was doomed mainly because of Lebanon's special position. Almost equidistant to Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, and to a second degree, to Persepolis, Rome, and Constantinople, Lebanon's central position on the geographic checkerboard made it strategically too important not to try to control. Even the great Alexander had first to eliminate Tyre (after seven months of bloody siege) before proceeding to vanquish the Persians (an ironic reminder is America's recent war on Hezbollah as a prelude to war on Iran!) Before its modern independence in 1943, this country came under the domination of 12 nations and empires, from the Assyrians to the French. Some neighboring countries had similar histories, but Lebanon owes its distinctive character to a combination of other elements:

1- Its centrality on the Eastern Mediterranean makes it a natural gateway between East and West.

2- Its function as a pool for waves of various ethnic, religious, national, and ideological mino-

rities, overflowing at times and sending its own emigrants abroad (14 millions of Lebanese descent are spread around the world).

3- The relatively high concentration of Christians has helped them shape the country's character. In particular, the Maronites, long united with Rome, have contributed much to the country's political and cultural affinities with the West.

Having long been a land of minorities, Lebanon has an astounding human and cultural pluralism that is rare to find in any similar «pocket-sized country». This endows the Lebanese with natural openness, curiosity and flexibility in their ways of life and thinking. This can also generate crises that destroy what they have patiently built. And it would take their genius for compromise to reinstall a certain balance, after some adjustment in power sharing, always under the motto «Neither victor, nor vanquished.»

For the past half century, Lebanon has been on a geopolitical fault line between two strong regional powers, Israel and Syria, backed by two world powers, the USA and the USSR. Right now the major world players in the area are the USA and Iran. As long as the conflict between them goes on, Lebanon will not enjoy its pluralism in peace and stability. As long as Lebanese politicians «cleverly» maneuver themselves as puppets for foreign powers, the Lebanese must wait for better days to regain their identity and their faith in the future of this «pool», with its in- and out-flowing groups, living in dynamic tension perhaps, but also in creative harmony.

The recent civil war and its aftermath are part of the tug-of-war between the internal communities, backed by external powers, a condition going on since the waning of the Ottoman Empire. It is basically triggered by drastic demographic changes: the Muslims steadily increase, whereas the Christians have dropped from 60% of the population in 1932 to 40% now. They beget few children, are hard hit by emigration, and lack demographic reservoirs. Those in neighboring countries emigrate, but no longer to Lebanon.

This is the only country in the Middle East and the Islamic world, where Christians are

full-fledged citizens. If the Lebanese consensual democracy ceases to exist, they will lose this last haven and will dwindle in numbers to the point of changing the country's character. Lebanon would be just another Middle Eastern country, with the Christians as second-class citizens as in Egypt, or even fourth-class citizens as in Israel. We would all have failed: Lebanese, covetous neighbors, and world community. We would have failed to keep alive the unique human experiment in this curious laboratory called Lebanon.

«Lebanon is more than a country,» said Pope Jean Paul II, «it is a mission.» This idea was recently stressed by French presidential candidate, Sarkozy: «Lebanon is a miracle of coexistence between religions and cultures.» In an age of religious wars and clash of cultures, Lebanon seems to gain in value as «mission». If it loses this mission, it loses its *raison d'être*.

The Bright Side

Why would someone like me, who has spent half of his life in the USA and Europe and who is an enthusiastic European, be tempted to come back to Lebanon?

Lebanon casts its spell on people, be they born and raised in it or not. It is not so much its natural beauty that you miss. It is rather the people: the diversity, openness, unbelievable stamina, and *joie de vivre*, even creative chaos, helped by a strong sense of humor. It is the intensity of everyday life here that makes the difference.

How often do I land in Frankfurt after a couple of months in Beirut and feel as if walking in my sleep. Such a big crowd moving in all directions, and such calm! All is so orderly that I feel something is missing. No one addresses you; no one looks you in the eyes. You are surrounded by thousands and you are alone. Nothing is personalized; all is neutral. For Lebanese, used to the humdrum of Beirut and to the warmth of human relations, Europe is too cold and often boring, even for an enthusiastic European like me. Besides, what I miss of European culture is becoming more and more accessible from afar, live or through various media.

If Lebanon is called «the Switzerland of the Middle East», it is maybe for its fabulous light, its regular and temperate seasons, the luxury of shifting within an hour's drive between hot seashores and snowy mountaintops; all this makes it an ideal tourist resort for the whole region. Besides, it is a country with 18 different religious communities, all possessing enough recognition and status to feel at home. Some religious and ethnic communities that are marginalized or even fossilized in other countries enjoy active presence in Lebanon: the Maronites, the Druze, the Armenians, the Kurds, the Syriacs, and the most vigorous and influential Shiite minority outside of Iran.

And Beirut is the «Paris of the Orient»! With less than 4 million people, Lebanon has 10 major universities of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds: Arabic, English, French, and Armenian; there are 41 branches spread across the land. In the early 1970s, the American University of Beirut, founded in 1866, had students from 63 countries and could boast more graduates at the UN than Harvard.

Since the mid-19th century, the Lebanese have been the major contributors to the rebirth of Arab culture and the heralds of modernism in the arts, in literature and thought. For five decades now, Beirut is the leading cultural center; its freedom of expression makes it the publishing house of the Arab World.

The Lebanese live dangerously, but Lebanon is gripping. You may leave it in anger, resolving to forget it, but when it bleeds, it becomes like your sick child, and you want to hug it and care for it.

And the world seems to care! Within the last weeks, Lebanon has been visited by a dozen prime ministers, foreign and defense ministers from all the major powers concerned, and by the UN Secretary General. Without being naive as to the goodwill of all, is one allowed to dream that the internal and world communities would finally understand the miracle, mission, or example this tiny land represents for its own people and for the world at large?

Als die Trümmer von den Öffnungen des Schutzraums weggeschafft waren, gingen wir hinaus, weil wir hinausgehen mussten. Schliesslich kann man nicht ohne einen triftigen Grund im Schutzraum bleiben. Ja, wenn du in einem Schutzraum bist, muss dein Aufenthalt darin zwingend begründet sein. Für einen kurzen

Zeitraum. Dann, danach muss man wieder hinaus ans Licht. Dann freuen sich die Leute über deine Rettung, beglückwünschen dich, dass du gesund und wohlbehalten bist. Und Freunde küssen dich. Freudentränen fliessen, weil du lebendig zurück ins Leben gekommen bist. Denn ins Leben kann nicht zurückkehren, wer nicht lebendig ist.

Aus: Raschid al-Daïf: al-Mustabidd («Der Eigenmächtige», 1983)

Von dem bekannten libanesischen Romancier Raschid al-Daïf ist auf deutsch erschienen: Lieber Herr Kawabata (arab. 1995; Basel, Lenos, 1998).

Auf französisch (Rachid El-Daïf) sind die folgenden Werke verfügbar: L'Été au tranchant de l'épée (en arabe 1979; Paris, Le Sycomo-

re, 1979); Passage au crépuscule (en arabe 1986; Arles, Actes Sud, 1992); L'Insolence du Serpent ou les créatures de l'ombre (en arabe 1987; Toulouse, AMAM, 1997); Cher Monsieur Kawabata (en arabe 1995; Arles, Sindbad-Actes Sud, 1998); Learning English (en arabe 1998; Arles, Actes Sud, 2002); Qu'elle aille au diable, Meryl Streep! (en arabe 2000; Arles, Actes Sud, 2004); Fais voir tes jambes, Leïla! (en arabe 2002; Arles, Actes Sud, 2006).

Noha Elbayoumi L'espace public libanais: un système discriminatoire et aléatoire

Si je me suis résolue à écrire sur mon pays, après tous ces malheureux événements, c'est pour mettre les choses au point pour moi-même.

De retour à Beyrouth fin juin 2006, après un long séjour de travail à l'université de Bahreïn, j'étais ravie de m'y installer définitivement afin que mes enfants, qui vivent en Amérique, puissent y venir régulièrement. À peine ai-je eu le temps de m'installer que la guerre israélienne de juillet 2006 a éclaté.

Le désordre est de retour dans ma vie: m'est-il impossible de vivre dans mon pays? Bon Dieu pourquoi? Sachant les intentions agressives ainsi que les actions destructives de l'Etat israélien vis-à-vis du Liban, je me suis emportée contre le pouvoir d'Israël, du Hezbollah, et contre la faiblesse de l'Etat Libanais.

Bien que je sois convaincue de notre droit légitime de défendre la souveraineté de notre pays et d'avoir une résistance populaire, je ne suis, en revanche, pas convaincue de la nécessité du monopole de la résistance. Le Hezbollah est un parti libanais, mais il ne cache pas ses alliés politiques, dont je redoute les motivations politiques et religieuses. En tant que femme libanaise moderne, je redoute tout parti religieux, je suis pour la diversité contre tout monopole de tout genre. La foi, c'est notre droit en tant qu'être humain, il ne s'agit pas là d'une idéologie, mais d'une conviction individuelle. En tant que musulmane, j'instaure une relation directe avec mon Dieu sans avoir recours à une quelconque institution. Dans

ma foi je suis tout à fait libre, selon le Coran. Malheureusement les gens vivent plutôt dans le mythe, beaucoup plus que dans le réel!

C'est notre droit d'avoir une résistance libanaise qui regroupe différents partis politiques. Je suis pour la

mixité qui répondrait mieux à la structure socio-culturelle du Liban. Nous avons une cause noble, celle de rétablir la souveraineté de notre pays. Mais comment peut-on la réaliser si des partis sont exclus? D'ailleurs, en aurait-on besoin, si l'Etat libanais était fort et avait une armée solide capable de défendre le pays? Pourquoi notre Etat génère tout le temps ses antidotes qui anticipent son rôle et violent ses droits?

Rappelons à cet égard la période où les milices palestiniennes ont mis leurs mains sur le sud libanais, bien que leur cause de libérer la Palestine soit légitime, mais ils ont établi un état\pouvoir à l'intérieur même de l'Etat libanais. Rappelons aussi que les milices libanaises ont violées, à leur tour durant la guerre civile (1975-1990), la souveraineté de l'Etat. Sans oublier bien sûr, l'occupation du sud à plusieurs reprises, et l'invasion incessante du territoire libanais par Israël.

Tout ceci pour se demander pourquoi l'Etat libanais est si faible? Je ne sais pas, si je suis à la hauteur pour répondre à une telle question, étant critique littéraire et culturelle et occupée par les études féministes et de genre. Toutefois je pourrais réfléchir à cette question en m'inspirant de mon expérience personnelle. J'avoue ma responsabi-