

Roseanne Saad Khalaf

## A Vanishing Hope

Postwar Lebanon was optimistically perceived as a period when the violence that pervaded almost two decades of civil war could finally be tucked away leaving the Lebanese to focus, at last, on reconstruction, reconciliation and revamping a decaying political system and devastated economy. Yet the brutal killing of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on February 14, 2005 and the subsequent string of assassinations that followed Syria's withdrawal, threw the country into further disarray.

Last summer's war between Hizbullah and Israel compounded the destruction creating a humanistic catastrophe of almost unimaginable proportions and embroiling Lebanon, once again, in the quagmire of regional and global conflict. Now, in the wake of an impervious and threatening deadlock between the opposition and the government, we live again in a volatile climate where clashes could quickly escalate into mayhem. People fear the dangers that might strike at any given moment as violence is always waiting and ready to be unleashed by insidious political exploiters forever eager to incite strife.

Lebanese youth are particularly vulnerable. They, perhaps more than any other group, remain terrorized by the growing confusion and despair so acutely experienced among a generation haun-

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ted by feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and loss resulting from the harsh realization that having scarcely recovered from an extraordinarily violent civil war, Lebanon is again in the throes of becoming a failed state. And, as such, it now seems to offer no present and, worse still, no future. My essay is interspersed with excerpts from the narrative texts of my creative

writing students at the American University of Beirut because their silent voices poignantly reflect the important perceptions of an educated group of young Lebanese.

*Last summer a war took place in my country. Most people may think it was scary but for me it's customary. Bombs here and there, hundreds of innocent dead and displaced. The usual suffering: devastated homes and shattered lives. This country is all about loss. We have even lost our dreams of hope, hope for a better tomorrow.* Oussama

Similar worries haunt older individuals for whatever their background, knowledge and skills they remain incapable of solving Lebanon's tangled complexity. Feasible transformative alternatives that could elevate politics to workable and progressive levels remain lacking. Most Lebanese find themselves abandoned in their own country, unable to control or reverse the immense obstacles

that have accumulated on the road to recovery. To make matters worse, all remain keenly aware that the confused and confusing post war moments are the result of quick fixes and temporary remedies imposed by greedy and inept politicians who hunger after power, expertly diverting attention from their shocking misdeeds and corrupt practices. Ironically, even they seem no longer in control, whether singularly or collectively, of the dire situation strangling the country.

*Our inept politicians are masterminds of self-interest and corruption and any exception to the rule, is immediately silenced. It's time to realize THEY are the problem and not the solution. But it's too late. Now they are merely the puppets of more powerful foreign players, trapped by their own cunning.* Karim

There are many reasons for the renewal of pervasive fear. Reawakened confessional and sectarian loyalties persistently define the political system and most aspects of life, leaving no rational way forward. Since the civil war officially ended in 1992, there have been few serious if any encouraging attempts, and certainly none that have gained momentum, to address the initial causes that have plagued the country for generations. Even potentially relevant movements like the Cedar Revolution stay stubbornly ineffective with only limited practical effects. The most logical and winnable way forward should be led by civil society, particularly the youth, but committed individuals, of all ages, as well as concerned organizations have been unable, so far, to alter Lebanon's low-quality politics and wasted national potential despite the wealth of talent in the country. Instead, the vast majority having persistently witnessed the degradation of their society and lives are overcome with the need to grieve. In a deeply divided country, my students move in a landscape of bleakness and ruin.

*I am from a country where nobody is allowed to love the rainbow because every color belongs to a certain faction. In my country hypocrisy rules because everyone*

*hates the other from the moment they are born because of their religion but they hide it behind a fake smile. My country is still fighting past wars instead of looking to the future. My country is a nightmare.* Rima

Hope on all sides is slowly vanishing. With the harsh discovery that political developments keep compounding hostility, violent conflict has become inevitable. Still, it's extraordinarily painful to face such realities when trapped by political instability and charmed by the seductive splendor of a beautiful country, the warmth and graciousness of its people. For me, the striking difference between now and the future is that by now I have experienced the past repeat itself and have no reason to believe the future will be any different. What I know but was ignorant of before is that in whatever respect the situation in the past and present might differ, in Lebanon there seems no escape from the brutal consequences of political turmoil. Nor has it been possible in the intervening years to find feasible and lasting solutions. We continue to search in vain for a common language of diversity, a «third way», but as sectarian tensions intensify we are nowhere near consensus. For the vast majority of my students, it has been a rude awakening.

*I no longer believe in Lebanon. It's an experiment that failed miserably. It's a futile attempt to bring people who have nothing in common together. Our tragic situation fills me with sadness.* Norma

*I come from a torn country: a country that has always been fought over and destroyed. Lebanon has killed my sense of belonging and stolen my hope. It's a land of occupation and devastation, car bombs and assassinations, a land torn apart by confessionalism and fractured national identity.* Leila

Meanwhile the country is sliding into further chaos with the prospect of jump-starting any lasting recovery fast disappearing from view. We

educate tens of thousands but can't offer them jobs to stay where they belong.

But what can be done to keep hope for a better Lebanon alive? To instigate change and ensure that progress continues? It would be dishonest and misleading to claim I know the answers to these questions or to pretend I can envision the impending end of this shockingly turbulent post-war era. There are, however, powerful reasons to keep hope from diminishing. With the exodus of Lebanese reaching dramatic proportions, we can no longer afford to continue drifting amid hesitations. We must try still harder to make the bold act of hoping possible by believing that better days are ahead. That soon enough momentum will be generated by capable Lebanese to successfully alter and transcend confining barriers; that citizens will eventually challenge authority and gain their rights while incompetent leaders will be relegated to the margins.

Twelve years ago, as a returnee to Lebanon, I was enthralled but equally concerned by the cultural dissonance and uncertainties of a postwar setting. In such a vibrant and anachronistic society, one becomes all the more conscious of the pressing need to reclaim an open, pluralistic en-

vironment conducive to a modicum of tolerance and coexistence. Working with students on text creation and discourse has, in a very modest way, opened up spaces for critical thinking and mutual understanding in an atmosphere of growing intolerance and latent hostility. Through creative engagement students from diverse political, religious and social backgrounds are able to envision spaces of freedom that challenge the strictures imposed by exclusionary mind-sets. Creative writing, insignificant as it may seem, can play a small but vital role in allaying ideological barriers and replacing them with pluralistic spaces where debate, negotiation and mutual understanding transforms and even replaces rigid ways of seeing with innovative and hopeful alternatives.

*In my country I am identified as a Moslem, Christian or Druze. I am merely a member of a certain family and a certain political party. My profession, my ideas, my convictions and my dreams are all irrelevant. But I refuse to accept confining labels. Nor do I plan to run away. There are better ways to build a nation. I intend to stay right here and help pave the way to an enlightened and peaceful future.*

Maher

#### Inserat

## Forschungskolloquium

Das Forschungskolloquium Islamwissenschaft trifft sich jedes Semester zwei bis drei Mal in Basel, Bern oder Zürich. In der offiziellen gemeinsamen Lehrveranstaltung der drei Seminare stehen Fragen der Methode im Zentrum. Fortgeschrittene Studierende bis zu Habilitierenden der Islamwissenschaften und benachbarter Fächer sind herzlich willkommen – auch solche, die ein Projekt vorstellen möchten. Informationen: [www.ori.unizh.ch/foki](http://www.ori.unizh.ch/foki)

Ali Fajjâd

## Staatskrise, nicht Landeskrise

Vor einigen Tagen besuchte ich einen europäischen Botschafter, der vor kurzem in den Libanon gekommen war. Als ich ihn fragte, wie er das Land so finde, antwortete er mit der Gegenfrage, ob es denn überhaupt ein Land gebe. In jener Woche beteiligte ich mich auch an einer Diskussion, die live im Fernsehen übertragen wurde und an der eine grosse Zahl Aktivisten, Professoren und Studenten teilnahm. Es wurden kritische Fragen aufgeworfen über das verlorene Land, das eigentlich gar nicht vorhandene Land, und das von uns gesuchte, jedoch nie gefundene Land. Im selben Zusammenhang und zur selben Zeit führte ein bekannter arabischer TV-Sender Debatten mit libanesischen Politikern, zu denen auch ich gehörte, und zwar mit dem Ziel, einen Dokumentarfilm über die Krise und die Zukunft des Libanon zu drehen. Es ging dabei vor allem um die Frage, ob der Grund für die Krise des Libanon in dessen Geschichte oder in dessen Geografie liege. Dieses Gefühl der Verunsicherung und des Zweifels der Libanesen ihrem Land gegenüber zeigt sich auch in der grossen Zahl der Auswanderer. Viele kehren dem Land definitiv den Rücken und lassen sich in einer Wahlheimat nieder, etwas das man bei anderen Völkern nur selten findet.

### Quelle der Verunsicherung

Woran mag es liegen, dass wir jede politische Krise, die das Land heimsucht, sofort zu einer grundsätzlichen, Identität, Struktur und Zukunft

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des Landes infrage stellenden Krise machen? Ist der Libanon wirklich auf einer Defizienz gegründet, die ihn ständig auf Krisen starren lässt, die, kaum gemeistert, erneut an die Oberfläche treten?

Dem kleinen Land ist zweifellos ein schweres Los beschieden: es liegt im Zentrum einer stürmischen, geplagten Region. Die geopolitische Instabilität entsteht in erster Linie durch die ständigen, von der israelischen Besetzung Palästinas ausgehenden Unruhen. Deren negativer Einfluss wäre jedoch weniger verheerend, wäre das Gefüge des libanesischen Staates nicht zu zerbrechlich, um sich scharfen Konfrontation und Konflikten zu stellen. Die uneinheitlichen Reaktionen und die oft widersprüchlichen Stellungnahmen der Libanesen zu den regionalen Entwicklungen zeigen leider auch, dass wichtige Entscheidungen nicht gemeinsam getroffen werden, und dass der Blick auf das Land und auf sich selbst oft unterschiedlich ist.

### Welche Krise?

Doch Verallgemeinerungen helfen nicht, das Wesen des Problems zu bestimmen. Im Gegenteil, man braucht eine klare und verbindliche Festlegung der Begriffe, um auch nur hoffen zu können, sich dem Problem praktisch zu nähern. Deshalb möchte ich dazu auffordern, drei Ebenen der andauernden libanesischen Krise zu unterscheiden: eine Krise des Landes, eine Krise des Staates und eine Krise der Exekutive.