



Lebanon: Middle East Enigma

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Beirut in the early 1970s was unlike any other city ... particularly in the Middle East. Sophisticated, vibrant, brimming with optimism, this cosmopolitan hub was unique in the world. Combining East and West, Arabic and French, tradition and modernity, the city flourished as a center of laissez-faire economics and liberal thinking. The entrepreneurial Lebanese enjoyed a well-deserved reputation as leaders in banking, trade and commerce, in publishing and in education. It was a country of great wealth and even greater creature comforts. Small wonder that tourists from neighboring Arab countries routinely flocked to Lebanon each summer to enjoy the many pleasures of Beirut's liberal lifestyle, to be restored by the cool air of the verdant mountain villages rising above the coastline.

As a young specialist assigned to the Ford Foundation's regional headquarters in Beirut, I was privileged to live in this fabled "Paris of the Middle East" for nearly three years, enjoying, for the majority of my tenure, its unique culture and exhilarating lifestyle. And then it all fell apart. As this finely-honed veneer of civility unraveled, random acts of violence escalated, questionable militias -- demanding to see ID's -- intercepted traffic and curfews were imposed. Life in Beirut was grinding to a halt. Sadly, reluctantly, I left a country I had come to know, enjoy and respect.

A 15-year civil war ensued, instigated both by long-simmering domestic resentments and foreign opportunism. The most conservative estimates place the dead at 150,000 people. Repeated invasions and occupations, by Israel and Syria, exacerbated tensions even further, wreaking immeasurable havoc on the country's infrastructure while shattering the fabric of Lebanese society and dividing its soul. Even the United States, long a steadfast ally of Lebanon, was drawn into this conflict after its Embassy was bombed in 1983, followed by an attack on the U.S. Marine barracks, killing 272.



An offer too good to refuse

Throughout those tense and dramatic years, I followed myriad accounts, not only of the unimaginable carnage and destruction in Lebanon, but also of the determination and perseverance of its citizens as they succeeded in ousting the last wave of foreign occupiers. Undaunted, they were stubbornly and boldly re-investing in their future.



Attracting visitors since the 1920's, Lebanon's oldest and highest ski resort commands spectacular views of the cedar forest and the Qadisha Valley below. At nearly 6,500 feet above sea level, the season can extend from late November to April.

Therefore, it was with great joy and, admittedly, a little trepidation, that I accepted an invitation from Dr. John Duke Anthony, founding president and CEO of the Washington-based National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations to serve as the scholar escort of a student delegation in the summer of 2012. Co-sponsored by the nonprofit Lebanon Renaissance Foundation, a select group of 10 undergraduate and graduate students had been chosen to participate in a study tour, to explore the diversity and complexity of modern Lebanon. Through an intensive 10-day cultural immersion, our group would travel widely, visiting a variety of culturally and historically significant sites and meeting with a broad range of leaders. Upon completion of this in-country program, student Fellows committed to devoting the following year to sharing their experiences in their schools and communities, achieving a "multiplier effect" in the cause of educating Americans on the "not-so-monolithic" Middle East.

Honored -- and delighted -- I readily accepted this invitation. In addition, who knew when and if the opportunity to revisit a country I had come to embrace, but hurriedly left, a lifetime ago would present itself again?



The land

Lying on the eastern Mediterranean littoral, Lebanon, at 4,000 square miles, is approximately half the size of New Jersey. It shares a border of some 50 miles with Israel to its south and, to its east and north, a border of more than 200 miles with Syria. A tough neighborhood, indeed!

In terms of both topography and culture, Lebanon bears little resemblance to stereotypical western images of countries of the Middle East. Its 140-mile coastline, much of it pristine, boasts public beaches and private clubs where sun-worshippers languish unselfconsciously in bikinis and European-styled swimsuits.



In the heart of Lebanon's cosmopolitan capital, artists prepare an exhibition of pottery with Phoenician motifs.

Nestled between two mountain ranges -- the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains -- which run a parallel course from north to south, lays the fertile Beqa'a Valley, an elongated plateau, stretching some 75 miles from north to south, averaging 10 miles wide. Blessed with fertile soil made moist by the Orontes and Litani river systems, the Beqa'a was trumpeted as the "breadbasket of Rome" during that empire's heyday. It remains the centerpiece of Lebanon's robust agricultural sector, a cultivated patchwork of fields, providing the country with almost half of its grain, fruits and vegetables, in addition to grapes and olives. The occasional Bedouin encampment, punctuated by tents and surrounded by grazing goats and sheep, provides a visual, if sentimental, reminder of the Middle Eastern landscape.

Rather than desert vistas, travelers routinely marvel at Lebanon's dense cedar forests and snow-capped mountains, with peaks exceeding 10,000 feet. The Lebanese are quick to point out that it is not uncommon to snow ski in Faraya and, one hour later, bask in the warm waters of the Mediterranean below.



... And its people

Although no official census has been taken since 1932, the population of Lebanon today is estimated at barely more than 4 million. Due in part, perhaps, to its geography, at the crossroads of three continents as well as its proud Phoenician heritage of trade and commerce, the Lebanese have acquired an enviable gift for language. Linguistic prowess appears to be a part of the national DNA as citizens navigate effortlessly through any number of languages ... Arabic, French and English, as well as Armenian, Greek, Turkish, German and others.

It is a curious fact that the Lebanese in diaspora far exceed the number of citizens at home. The number of Lebanese living abroad is estimated at between 7 million and 15 million. While the largest single community of expatriates currently resides in Brazil, individuals of Lebanese origin have traveled to American shores since the 19th century searching for greater opportunities while, at the same time, contributing greatly to the U.S. cultural mosaic.



Riad Al-Solh was instrumental in achieving independence from France. He was appointed Lebanon's first Prime Minister in 1943, serving again from 1946 to 1951.



A precarious balance

Formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, the territories of Lebanon and Syria were designated as part of the French "mandate" by the victorious Allies after World War I. Lebanon, whose intellectuals were among the first in the region to forcefully articulate the cause of "Arab nationalism," was granted independence in 1943.

Lebanon, a republic, is a parliamentary democracy, organized along sectarian lines. With 18 religious sects recognized, Lebanon's power-sharing arrangement is designed, in principle, to fairly distribute access and influence. Based on a 1932 census, the National Pact reserves high-ranking offices for members of specific religious groups; the president must be a Maronite (an indigenous Christian sect, recognized by Rome), the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the speaker of the Parliament a Shi'a Muslim, and the deputy speaker a Greek Orthodox. And "herein," as the saying goes, "lies the rub."

Throughout the decades since independence, the demographics of Lebanon have unquestionably evolved, while the formula for power-sharing has not. Since 1948, and again in 1967, refugees from Palestine have entered Lebanon in droves. Their role and status within that country has become a lively source of dispute. According to United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the number of registered refugees in Lebanon wholly dependent on international assistance is estimated at 430,000, or 10 percent, of the country's population. The number of unregistered who have integrated into Lebanese society, through marriage or independent means, is even greater.

Living in 12 camps, Palestinian refugees form a contentious underclass in the Lebanese mosaic. Denied citizenship, they lack many social and civil rights, are barred from owning or bequeathing property, and have limited access to public health and educational services.



To complicate matters further, as many Lebanese Christians have emigrated in recent years, the Shi'a population has increased, particularly in the south, calling into question the historic power-sharing arrangement, particularly by those living on the fringes of Lebanon's relatively affluent society.

Combined with repeated and persistent international meddling -- from Israel, Syria, Iran and others -- the last four decades have witnessed an unraveling of the precarious balance that once defined Lebanon as an oasis of stability in an otherwise turbulent region.



Following a fifteen-year civil war (1975-1990), which claimed tens of thousands of lives and ravaged the country's infrastructure, the determination of the Lebanese is apparent as they invest in their future, rebuilding in Beirut (pictured here), and throughout the country



Welcome back!

After an overnight flight from Washington, transiting in Istanbul, our delegation arrived at Beirut's gleaming new and greatly enlarged international airport. Aboard a small bus en route to our hotel in Ashrafiyeh, an upscale enclave in largely Christian East Beirut, the capital city was barely recognizable through my jet-lagged eyes. From the cluster of towering suburbs which had sprung up on its southern flank to the traffic jams, clogging new highways, bypasses and intersections, cherished images of the past quickly gave way to new realities. Exactly how many years had it been?

A new reality

A drive to the historic downtown of central Beirut, followed by a walking tour of once-familiar neighborhoods quickly brought home the brutal reality of decades of civil strife in Lebanon.

While certain landmarks, such as the 1862 Ottoman Grand Serail (Government Palace) and Hamidiyyeh clock tower, had miraculously escaped the ravages of war, very few familiar structures remained; those pre-1975 buildings that survived the war's savagery all bore the scars of that tragic chapter in Lebanon's history ... pockmarked with artillery shells or disfigured almost beyond recognition.

For this observer, the greatest shock was the sight of Martyr's Square. Originally known as the Place des Canons, this expansive area, the heart of Beirut's central district, was renamed in honor of the Arab nationalists whose defiance of Ottoman Turkish oppression cost them their lives. Prior to the Lebanese civil war, this was the hub of commerce and finance, of political and retail activity ... the most frequently-requested destination while boarding a "service," or shared taxi.

Then, during the 1970s and beyond, Martyr's Square became the frontline of battle, bearing the brunt of damage and destruction. A "green line" was drawn through this historic center, effectively dividing the capital into east and west, rendering this once-vibrant center a "no man's land."



Today Martyr's Square is a wasteland of sorts, a vast, urban landscape ringed by barricades, traffic jams and cranes frenetically transforming the face of the capital city. Gleaming, decidedly untraditional high-rise buildings ascend from the ashes. While all around it seems to have vanished, the iconic bronze statue commemorating those who sacrificed their lives in earlier times remains standing in the square. Bullet-ridden, but defiant, it stands as a poignant symbol of the city's suffering. And resolve.



Mount Lebanon: churches, monasteries, and convents



Mount Lebanon

To fully appreciate Lebanon's culture and diversity, our delegation ventured out of the capital on several day trips under the capable leadership of our escort, Melkar (whose uncommon name is of Phoenician origin), to experience the richness and diversity of this country's historical narrative.

Traveling northward on the wide coastal highway en route to Mount Lebanon, we paused at the mouth of the Dog River (Nahr al-Kalb) to consider the many plaques whose inscriptions bear witness to more than 3,000 years of Levantine history. At this site, successive invaders have left their calling cards in the form of stelae (stone slabs with commemorative inscriptions) recalling their passage ... and travails ... through this much-coveted land. From the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II to Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to Emperor Napoleon III to the arrival and final withdrawal of French troops in the 20th century, this physical vignette serves as a powerful reminder of Lebanon's complex history.

Turning eastward, into the interior, our driver Elian deftly navigated the winding roads into Mount Lebanon as we marveled at the magnificent vistas and terraced agriculture of the Qadisha Valley ... cameras clicking in rapid succession. In the seventh century A.D., Maronite Christians began to establish communities in these mountains, among the caves and waterfalls, building monasteries and chapels in the rock. On this Sunday morning, as church bells rang from every hilltop, we observed families walking through the streets of Ehdn on their way to Mass while, in small roadside cafes, old men huddled over cups of thick, cardamom-infused Turkish coffee.



In historic downtown Beirut, two architectural icons: the Ottoman clock tower, Place de L'Etoile, built in 1897; and the Muhammad Al-Amin mosque, in Nejme Square, resembling the Blue Mosque in Istanbul.



To meet 'The Master'

As we neared the red-roofed Christian town of Bcharre, we read aloud from a well-worn collection of *The Prophet*. This seminal collection of poems and short stories is the timeless masterpiece of the best-known literary figure in modern Lebanese history, Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), poet, artist and mystic. Born in Bcherre, Gibran studied art with Auguste Rodin in Paris before moving to the U.S. to concentrate on writing and painting. His words, containing heartfelt musings on a variety of timeless subjects, have been translated into dozens of languages.

Entering the Khalil Gibran Museum, an ancient cavern which had once housed a Carmelite monastery, our voices became hushed, as if venturing into a place of worship. Meandering from one room to another in silence, absorbing his extensive collection of his art, treasured photos and simple personal effects, the spirit of "The Master" seemed to envelope us. An indescribable, reflective peace permeates this place, particularly in the final room in which he rests for eternity.



Behold: Cedars of Lebanon

For millennia, the most durable symbol of Lebanon has been the cedar (*Cedrus libani*) ... a botanical specimen of legendary proportions and historic significance. Today, the Lebanon Cedar, "the tree of kings," is displayed on the national flag as well as on the country's coat of arms. It is the logo of Middle East Airlines, the national carrier.

Adult cedars, evergreen coniferous trees, may reach heights of 130 feet, with trunks exceeding 8 feet in diameter. Countless civilizations have prized the cedar of Lebanon ... Romans, Greeks, Persians, Egyptians and Babylonians, to name but a few. The Phoenicians used its strong, straight timber to construct houses, temples and ships. Prized throughout the largely wood-starved Middle East, its fragrant wood was chosen to craft the furniture discovered in Tutankhamen's tomb, while the ancient Egyptians extracted its resin for use in mummification. Referenced countless times in the Bible, the imported wood of the Cedar of Lebanon was used by the Hebrews for the construction of important buildings, including King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

Throughout the millennia, excessive deforestation has threatened the *c. libani* with extinction. While conservation and reforestation are now under way, only two small remnants of original cedar forests remain in Lebanon. Above Bcharre, on the slopes of Jebel ("mountain") Makmel, lies a dense green forest. At 6,500 feet above sea level, these majestic, massive specimens are breathtaking. Legend has it that, in this rarified and aromatic air, the famous 19th-century poet and adventurer Lord Byron had carved his initials in one of the trunks.



The red-tiled roofs of Bcherre, birthplace of the legendary artist and poet, Khalil Gibran, dot the Qadisha Valley: 'one of the most important early Christian monastic settlements in the world' (UNESCO).



AUB: An enduring American legacy

Returning to the capital city, our student delegation explored the sprawling campus of the internationally-renowned American University of Beirut ... 60 manicured acres located on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Arguably the United States' most positive and enduring legacy in the region, AUB was founded in 1866 by the Rev. Daniel Bliss as the Syrian Protestant College. This private, independent, nonsectarian university, one of the few regional institutions following a liberal arts curriculum, has evolved into one of the most prestigious schools of higher learning in the Middle East.

Offering a variety of bachelor's, master's, M.D., and Ph.D. degree programs, the university is coeducational with males and females equally represented. Its 6,500 undergraduate and 1,600 graduate students hail from almost 70 countries.

AUB alumni have had a significant impact on the region ... and on the world. Throughout its history, this institution has produced scores of presidents, prime ministers, members of parliament, ambassadors and educators, as well as leaders in medicine, business and industry. In 1945, 19 AUB alumni were delegates to the signing of the Charter of the United Nations, more than any other university in the world.

National identity

As our student group traversed the rich and varied Lebanese landscape, a recurrent, if disturbing, theme emerged. Whether Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Sunni, Shi'a, Druze or other, there appears to be little consensus on questions of either national identity or modern history.



Cedars forest, Lebanon

How a citizen of any country defines himself/herself may, indeed, vary widely; regional identity, ethnicity, religion, race, political party or even language, invariably come into play. Lebanon is no different. The difference here, however, may rest in the widespread domestic suspicions and antipathies which threaten to undermine the integrity of the state, particularly as foreign powers and their surrogates vie for an ever larger share of power, influence ... and geography in the Levant.

To further illustrate this point, a historical visit to the coastal city of Jubayl, adjacent to the ancient Phoenician settlement of Byblos, unexpectedly turned into a lesson in modern Lebanese politics as the proprietress of a souvenir shop took heated exception to the assumption that Lebanese were "Arabs."

"I am first a Christian, then a Maronite, then a Lebanese," she insisted. "Never an Arab."

Collective amnesia

The civil war of 1975-90, followed by additional foreign invasions, occupations and high-profile assassinations, wrenched Lebanon from its moorings. Aside from the catastrophic toll visited upon the country's physical infrastructure, the effects on the collective psyche of its citizens are, in many ways, even more alarming.



Enduring U.S. legacy in the Middle East. The American University of Beirut, founded 1866: "That they may have life and have it more abundantly."

When interviewing both young, urbane Beirutis, as well as their more provincial cousins in rural areas, about the causes, effects and lessons of the 1975-90 civil war, we discovered that there is no consensual historical narrative. We asked, repeatedly, about the education of youngsters ... specifically, their understanding of the tumultuous events of recent decades and were informed that there are three different textbooks in circulation throughout the country, each one containing varying accounts of internal events from 1975 onward.

Alas, national reconciliation has largely been overlooked in favor of immediate exigencies, which are manifold. In this, perhaps, most "advanced" of Middle Eastern countries, electrical service is spotty, at best, even in the capital city; routine outages are compensated by private generators ... for those who can afford the "luxury." In Lebanon, the private sector and civil society are paramount. With a tradition of banking secrecy, laissez-faire economics and consummate entrepreneurial skills, Lebanese, as individuals, have demonstrated a remarkable degree of resilience and perseverance. It is an admirable formula.



Yet, in the absence of either national dialogue or national consensus, the haunting refrain of the late poet, George Santayana, is sadly inescapable:

"Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

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