

## Lebanese Food for Thought

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Last October I left on a trip to Lebanon that only lasted five days, but that has really changed the way I think about the middle east. I teach in the English department at Portland State, where I am researching the literature and culture of America's state of permanent war. Several years ago, I wrote a book about American culture during the long cold war, the era under which I grew up. Now I'm working on contemporary literature, culture, and the war on terror. I left for Lebanon because I was invited to give a talk by the Center for American Studies Research at the American University of Beirut. This center was recently endowed by a Saudi prince with a big budget to fly out American scholars. My plan was to talk about a key part of my research project in which I am analyzing Islamophobia, and the construction of the Muslim as permanent enemy. The more I've looked at this, the more I've grown convinced that Islamophobia is a kind of racism, but not like the color-line racism we're more familiar with in the U.S. It actually functions very much like anti-semitism, and I'm discovering that it is even linked to it historically. So this is what I had been invited to talk about.

Different things hung over me in preparation for this trip. First, I was teaching a class at PSU on the Bible as Literature. I was also teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Shabbat school, where we are reading the Book of Genesis with the kids. I couldn't help but notice the ancient presence of Lebanon in this very first book of the Bible: Jacob's uncle is named Laban, the namesake of Lebanon ("Laban" means "white" for

the snowy color of Lebanon's mountains). So Lebanon is really our uncle, and the father of our ancestors Leah and Rachel, the grandfather of Joseph and Benjamin.

I was also a bit anxious to tell my family about my intended visit. My parents grew up in Tel- Aviv, and I traveled frequently to Israel growing up. When I told them, my parents were not thrilled at this idea: too dangerous. I also considered adding a visit to Israel on the same trip, only to discover that this was simply not possible. Israel has invaded Lebanon twice, most recently in 2006, and the countries are legally still at war. This too gave me pause. Finally, two weeks before I left, President Ahmadinejad of Iran visited Lebanon to great acclaim. Who supported this man and why? What did that mean?

It was a 24 hour flight coming in. When I finally arrived, the first thing that struck me was how exactly like flying into Israel it was, swooping in over the eastern Mediterranean, until you suddenly see land and come in at the airport. Haifa is only 70 miles down the coast from Beirut. And indeed, the landscape is much like Haifa, hilly country on the edge of the sea, but with a range of green mountains quickly rising up.

What I discovered about Beirut is a series of paradoxes. My first impression of Beirut the day I arrived was, what a bustling city, not lavish, but clearly a commercial center, a cultural crossroads and a cosmopolitan capital. It's a place where Europeans, North Americans, and middle easterners, cross paths. The

immigrant labor patterns there are the same as in Israel: Filipinas and Sri Lankan fill the service industries.

Signs everywhere were in English, French, and Arabic. French because it used to be part of the French Mandate of Greater Syria. English because it's the entrepot language. And Arabic, the daily language. Most people are bilingual or even trilingual. There are a plethora of newspapers with wide ranges of opinions. And massive building projects were underway everywhere. The Lebanese economy is growing at something like 10% a year right now, as Gulf oil money flows in.

But on the other hand, Beirut is a severely damaged city. When I walked about, in almost every neighborhood I saw buildings destroyed by artillery and riddled with bullet holes. This is a country that has suffered endless sectarian conflicts and regional wars. The worst of these was a 15 year civil war, from 1975 to 1990, including two invasions from Israel. After the civil war, Lebanon was occupied by Syria for over a decade. The country got caught in the crossfire of another war between Israel and the Shi'a militia Hezbollah in 2006. And then there have been a variety of near wars, massacres, and street conflicts. I wanted to understand why and how so many contrary things could be true about this country.

While there I spoke with academics, taxi drivers, hotel workers, tour guides, and most precious, an old friend who now lives outside of Beirut. I began getting some answers to my questions after I gave my talk at the American University of Beirut. The campus is located in Muslim west Beirut, but the university itself was founded by American and Syrian Protestant missionaries. Much of the sectarian

conflict within Lebanon, and the conflict with Israel and Syria has in fact circled around political contests between Christians and Muslims. Some people even told me that they didn't consider Lebanon a real nation at all. It was what they called a "rump state."

After the Ottoman empire was defeated in World War One, the French and British took over this part of the world. The British were in Palestine. But it was the French that carved tiny Lebanon out of a much larger region, Greater Syria, back in 1943 and made it an separate country. Why did they do that? Because those borders made possible a very small Christian-dominated state in the Middle East, an idea that the French liked. In 1943, the year of Lebanese independence, Maronite Christians just possibly constituted a majority. But even then it was questionable. Within a decade or so, there's no question that Muslims already constituted a majority of the Lebanese population, yet the rigid power-sharing political system installed in 1943 treated them as a minority, granting the presidency and a majority of parliamentary seats automatically to the Christian majority.

This has consequences for Lebanese nationalism. It's the Maronite minority that has always thought of Lebanon as a distinct nation, connected to the Phoenecian tradition and perhaps to the Christian west. But their Muslim neighbors have been more likely to think that Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, and Palestinians are not really different peoples at all, that they are all part of one larger Levantine, East Mediterranean Arab culture. Even if they approved of Lebanese independence, they were unlikely to accept a political system set up around an

outdated census that ensured that they, the majority of the population, lived in a state controlled by the Maronite minority.

Then there's the neighbors. For Syria, the independence of Lebanon has been a source of continuous resentment, a breakaway province, and moreover the one with the major port and commercial center, Beirut, and the mountains out of which spilled the precious little water to be found in the middle east. And Israel, in the early decades, also liked the idea of a Christian state to the north that was politically opposed to a pan-Arab vision. Lebanon is in truth a small proxy state (half the size of Israel) where Syria and Israel have fought out their own conflicts at a huge price to the peoples of Lebanon.

The issue of Palestine hangs over Lebanon like no other. When Palestinian Arabs fled their homes in 1948, during the war that Israel calls the independence war, over 200,000 ended up in Lebanon. The Palestinian Arab refugees were herded into about a dozen refugee camps in which their descendants still live to this day. Why do they still live there? One important answer is that the Palestinian refugees were 85% Muslim. For Maronites, preserving the case for Christian rule and later, power sharing, depended upon not letting the Palestinians integrate into the population of Lebanon.

This was actually the origin of the Lebanese civil war, which began as a conflict between the right-wing Christian militias and the Palestinians, with support from left-wing Arab nationalist Lebanese parties. Somewhere between 130,000 and 250,000 Lebanese and Palestinians died in that conflict. Over 1 million (25% of the country's population were wounded), About a million (another 25%) left the

country for good, many of those Lebanese Christians. The economy was utterly destroyed for decades by that conflict.

This history might also illuminate for you why Israel enjoined the conflict. When it became clear that the leftist Lebanese/Palestinian alliance was likely to win the war, Israel intervened, driving the PLO out of Lebanon and hoping to restore the possibility of rule by the Christian Phalangist party led by the Gemayel family. You may have seen the amazing Israeli animated film, *Waltz with Bashir*. That movie is all about the PTSD of Israeli soldiers who invaded Lebanon in 1982, halfway through the civil war, shelled the city of Beirut, and ended up assisting the Christian right-wing party of in massacring Palestinian civilians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla.

I had always thought that Sabra and Shatilla were somewhere in the south of Lebanon. But I met up with an old friend in Beirut named Marcy, a nice Jewish girl originally from the San Fernando Valley who had gotten more and more involved in Palestinian rights over the years, and finally abandoned a tenure-track professorship in Boise to move to Lebanon where she is now chair of the English department at a prestigious high school in a mountain village to the east of Beirut. Marcy drove me around Beirut, and imagine my surprise when she took me past the National Museum of Lebanon, which I had walked to from my hotel just a few days earlier, and then an equal distance further south, and suddenly there we were in Shatilla! The Palestinian refugee camp is RIGHT there in the middle of Beirut. It is not at tent city, but a poor neighborhood with restricted residency. In fact, the best

word to describe Shatilla is a “ghetto.” It resembles more than anything the districts in European cities where Jews were once required to live.

Why do the Palestinians stay in these camps after all these generations, I asked Marcy? Her answer was very interesting. Most of the Christians have actually left. They are already integrated into Lebanon. So too the handful of wealthy who can buy their way to citizenship. But the rest were, for many decades, not permitted to own property in Lebanon, and not allowed to work in most professions. This left the residents dependent upon UN refugee organizations and NGOs. Over time, under the dire conditions, a sense of community has also developed that people are hesitant to leave. And many do still hold out for a return to their homes in Palestine, feeling that if they leave the camps, that dream will disappear too.

The one other excursion I took was a bus tour to the Northeast of Lebanon in the Bekaa valley which lies on the far side of the coastal mountains, and along the Lebanese border. This is Hezbollah country, and where the Shi’a population of Lebanon live, along with a large group in the south. Of all the groups, the Shi’a were the most politically marginalized for many decades, and the rise of Hezbollah emerges out of the bitterness of that experience, particularly for the Shi’a of the south who were caught in the crossfire between the Palestinian guerilla groups and the Israelis. Even though the population of Lebanon now has more Shi’a than Sunnis or Christians, they are still granted only a very small fraction of the Parliament, so the problem is ongoing. There’s no question that Hezbollah is funded by both the Syrians and the Iranians, and they have become something of a state within a state in Lebanon, the only remaining armed militia in the country, though they have also

become a political party in the last fifteen years or so, and are part of the current unity government.

Lebanese politics remains completely factionalized, with constantly changing alliances. And the instability of the skewed political system, which even today is out of synch with the demographic realities, continues to threaten the possibility of civil war. That's something I could definitely feel while I was there.

But at the same time, I could also feel the open political discussions, read about powerful political disagreements in a free press, see give and take in a political process. And one thing I also did NOT see in Lebanon was dire poverty or homelessness. Even in the refugee camps, there is a sense of people taking care of their own in Lebanon, a real sense of community in a country that is not autocratic, as are the states in Jordan, Syria, or Egypt. It's a country with vibrant literature and arts, bookstores, cafes, and commercial networking. I couldn't help feeling a sense of frustration that the American University of Beirut, one of the middle east's best universities could not be in dialogue and collaboration with Tel-Aviv University just 130 miles down the coast, As a child of urban Israelis, I felt very much at home in Beirut. Beyond all the political conflicts, I could feel the cultural commonalities and, as an outside who did not have to suffer those conflicts or feel the emotions they unleash, I could fantasize about an open border.

Lebanon will never be able to solve its problems alone. The Palestinian refugee situation, the regional conflict over water (another element in the mix), and the military pressures exerted by both Syria and Israel both, are international issues. Lebanon has enough domestic political problems of its own, but it was clear

to me that they will only be able to address those permanently if there is a regional settlement first, one that answers the Palestinian question and demilitarizes the borders. But if that is ever to happen, the middle east could become again what it has always been, and what Jewish culture has always shared with that of other middle eastern cultures: a vibrancy as the world's cultural crossroads the meeting place of east and west.