

Transitions

Reflections from Lebanon

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This is the personal diary of a student traveling to Lebanon for the first time, struggling to understand the country, the intellectual density, and the emotions that her travel provoked.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21, 2007

I am one of nine students on a delegation traveling and conducting research in Lebanon. I was born in Pakistan and moved to the United States at the age of 13. I am the only practicing Muslim on our trip and one of only three in our group not born in the US. This is my third time to the Middle East, and each time I go, I return with a feeling of both respect and perplexity. The meetings we have had here in Beirut with politicians, researchers, clerics and students are both intellectually exhausting and stimulating. I have not yet had a moment's rest to put my thoughts together, not to mention my emotions.

Within just a few days of arriving in Beirut, we are challenged and confronted with a barrage of Lebanese perspectives. Beirut speaks to us about Israel, the United States, Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, Druze Leader Walid Jumblatt, Rafik Hariri's Future TV, Hezbollah's TV station al-Manar. It talks to us about Northern Beirut and Southern Beirut, about the civil war, East Beirut, West Beirut, and the Green Line. We hear Lebanon internally debating its increasing expenses, national debt, and lack of efficient public policy and public institutions. It speaks of the increasing sectarian divide perpetuated after the war and after the March 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. It counts the days since Hariri's assassination, and it criticizes the US and Israel for civilian casualties during the July/August 2006 war. Some talk about the Lebanese army, Hezbollah disarmament, and Hezbollah's political integration. Others mention the group's efficiency in providing social services and defending Lebanon.

After endless pre-departure discussions on our safety in Lebanon, the risks we were taking in visiting the country, and the value of this immersive endeavor of traveling to Lebanon, the truth of the matter is that Beirut is calm. Sitting here, looking down from our hotel balcony at the nighttime

bustle on our street, the city seems as safe as my home in New York. However, in this serenity, I find myself feeling distress. It was not long ago that people were fighting and dying in these streets; the remnants of civil war remain in building facades and the faces of those who pass daily through their doors. Even in the 2006 summer's short war, many people lost their lives and were displaced; but now there is calm. When I see this calm scene before me and think about the violence, the internal debating and redefining of nation and identity, I am shocked. I try my best to fit all the pieces together. But even after spending some time here, listening to the many different voices, I cannot figure out this country. Lebanon continues to remain vague and complex.

Many different actors have played a role in fueling the crises of this small country. This latest war in 2006 and its aftermath is no exception. I try my best to understand each of them individually, their interests, their fears and their ambitions. I hear Hezbollah's claims to protect itself and Lebanon. I can understand its demands for greater internal representation and legitimacy and popularity amongst Lebanese. But I can also empathize with the fear that even a possibility of change in the status quo arouses in some Christian and Druze minorities.

There is a part of me that can see clearly into United States foreign policy, knowing that the US must act in its own self-interest. As an American, I can understand what is important to the US: our dependence upon the Middle East for resources, but also our need to protect our Israeli allies. On the other side, I can sense the feeling of exploitation and betrayal that the Lebanese feel towards our failed policies in the region. But the truth is that the United States will be criticized whether it involves itself or not. Some will always think that the United States is not doing enough, or not giving enough aid or support, and others will think that it is giving the money to the wrong groups, thus creating and aiding tensions. Someone will always cry out that the US is the conspirator, the cause of all problems.

I can also understand the view from Israel. I can understand the Israelis' fear that the Arab world is out to destroy their country. I cannot deny that some Arabs—though not a majority from my experience—might even actively maintain anti-Jewish sentiments. For example, when a small group of us explored the one-room bookstore across the street from our hotel in Beirut, we found a prominent display of the latest edition of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, translated into Arabic and English. The owner, a sturdy product of a past generation, proudly displayed for us his own fluent German, and pointed us to other texts about Germany, architecture, and the Third Reich.

Yet, I also know that Israel has the strongest army in the region and has

used its military power to expand its territory. Given the chance, would it not try to do so again? Unfortunately, the summer of 2006 showed many in Lebanon that Israel was not willing to negotiate first. A friend recounted hatred on the other side of the border, sharing the story of an Israeli Defense Force soldier who trained his dog to discriminate between Israelis and Arabs. Such stories leave one baffled by the intensity of emotions present on the ground at times.

So who is to blame for the violence and discord in Lebanon? Given that Lebanon was a colonialist creation, are the colonialists to blame for the country's troubles? Does the blame fall squarely on the Israelis? The United States? The Christians? The Palestinian refugees? The Shiites? Will a week give any of us a true picture of Lebanon? Will three questions per person for each of the fifteen or twenty people we meet here point us to a solution? Is there even a solution to be found? "Lebanon will not change,"¹ says Timor Goksel, a professor at the American University in Beirut and former advisor to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. The realist in me wants to believe him, because he speaks about Lebanon and life like it is. His words are not sugarcoated with diplomacy, not charged with passion or sentiments, and he refrains from using decorated intellectual theories built over the years. He speaks from his experience of people and of life.

His pessimism, however, saddens me. The human loss and despair we see in front of our eyes, on videos, and in the media...is that the reality we must accept? I am privileged to be on this research trip. Many of us who have had wealth, freedom and access do not appreciate our burden. We are insensitive. Instead of empowering those who are not as fortunate, we try to build up our own credentials by doing research. We create opportunities for ourselves, using others' suffering to make sentimental and provocative movies and media articles that make us look more interesting and intelligent. We utilize this human emotion to promote ourselves, to better ourselves. Is it ethical? Perhaps it is, if our intention is to understand respectfully and responsibly, and in return to portray the context to those who have no other means of accessing the rest of the world.

A story without context can be emotional, breathtaking, and provocative while lacking a responsible representation of reality. For example, a picture I encountered here in Lebanon, of a Ku Klux Klan sign at a rally in the Southern United States reminds me of the discrimination and racism I have felt at times in the US. This picture alone, though, without a deeper understanding of the context, leaves out a real sense of the xenophobia and racism of white supremacists. When I see this picture, the issues in Lebanon are not too far removed. The KKK sign is not so different in arousing my emotions than a

movie screening of the destruction and deaths suffered in the Hezbollah-Israel war this summer. They are both testaments to the injustices in the world, which strip people of their dignity.

With my thoughts torn and my emotions growing comes my natural response of tears. I cry just as much for being a brown Muslim-American in the US who has faced racism and stereotyping as I do for the woman in Southern Lebanon who couldn't bury her daughter. My tears are for the dialogue that so often fails in trying to foster understanding with the other side, be it on "liberating the Muslim woman", "promoting democracy," or just co-existing in peace.

Alone for the first time in days, I take this moment to unravel. I cannot hold my tears when seeing someone suffer, or thinking about the lost potential of so many kids who cannot afford to go to school, or the thought that someone might lose their parents, or the fact that there are many in this world who are just making it day to day. The Palestinian refugees that I hear about are not granted a right to Lebanese citizenship; they want to go home but where do they return to? Some are without documents, living under the government's radar in Palestinian refugee camps. I cry for a similar situation in the US where migrant workers are living a life without documents, where they are exploited, blackmailed, and abused. I am worried about people who live in fear or those who live in anger or those who live without tears in numbness. Perhaps I cry because I am looking for a compromise that is not quite so easy to find.

I collect the pieces of myself, which have fallen bare. We keep going in our lives, despite what happens, searching for compromises between the reality and the ideal. We keep going, wanting to be strong. We fight to push our limits, though sometimes a breakdown or a crisis is inevitable. Often, reflection follows a breakdown. As a result we step out of our comfort zones and explore new and painful areas. It is in this process that we can finally see through the other's eyes.

I fear that we are losing our humanity gradually. Perhaps I just realized it, here in this country. Perhaps it is seeing tragedy and hope intertwined at this crossroad that I am forced to see my own mirages crumble. I look outside my balcony, onto the traffic, and I see an eternal and enduring place, a Lebanon emerging from a breakdown, reflecting and searching for compromise.

¹ Timor Goksel, NIMEP personal interview, 21 March 2007.