

"Lebanon's Freedom in a Dangerous Region"

Summary

The Los Angeles World Affairs Council, in partnership with the Levantine Cultural Center, presented renowned Lebanese broadcaster and writer Karen Boustany on January 18th 2013. Ms Boustany who talked about political and cultural life in Beirut, the crisis in neighboring Syria, and the future of the Middle East. Ms Boustany came at a time when Lebanon once again finds itself in the midst of a crisis that is not of its own making – this time the brutal struggle for power in Syria that for many years orchestrated similar power struggles inside Lebanon itself.

At the crossroads of the Mediterranean and Arab cultures, Lebanon has a rich history and broad ethnic diversity: Beirut is famously often referred to as Paris of the Middle East. Bordered by Syria to the north and Israel to the south, Lebanon has also witnessed much conflict and suffering. Today Lebanese watch the civil war in Syria with much anxiety, fearful the fighting will spill over the border into Lebanon.

Ms Boustany was born in a village on Mount Lebanon, and has a degree in French literature from the Sorbonne in Paris as well as a degree in communications and political sciences from the American University in Beirut. She has a daily talk show on Lebanese TV called “Kitab”, in which she interviews Lebanese and international guests on cultural and political topics, and she also writes regular columns for a local newspaper in Beirut. In addition, Ms Boustany has established her own advertising and marketing company, and has written two books, one of poetry, the second a memoir of her father.

Ms BOUSTANY's PRESENTATION: Lebanon was cited 71 times in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible. Three and a half millennia later, Lebanon, a tiny country smaller than Los Angeles Metropolitan area, is constantly on the news forefront for dramatic reasons: wars, massacres, assassinations, bombings... All these unfortunate events have stripped down Lebanon from the opportunity of shining through its culture. Instead, the country has become synonymous of chaos. In French slang, saying "it's Beirut" about a place means that it is a total mess.

Nevertheless, culture is still thriving in Lebanon, thanks to the relentless efforts of those who choose to resist with art to express their views and feelings, despite the tremendous financial difficulties to make a living out of these communication means. I am myself a poet and a writer, and I dedicate my time to shed lights on books written by Lebanese from all horizons. My daily program, Kitab, is broadcasted three times a week live on MTV Lebanon. I have hosted, till today, 1500 writers in less than four years.

I also regularly produce and execute series about Lebanese who made tremendous worldwide achievements and marked their time. The reason I am currently in the US is to present some of these great achievers to the Lebanese audience: Charles El Achi, Director of NASA's legendary Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Carlos Ghosn, the famed CEO of Nissan and Renault, Mario Kassab, the Hollywood producer behind many blockbusters and who has profoundly changed the business standards, judge James Kaddouh and much more...

We are so proud to see great achievers of Lebanese origins: the famed designers Elie Saab, Zuhair Murad and Reem Acra, the inventor of the iPod, Tony Fadell, the world's richest man, Carlos Slim Helu, singers Fairuz, Shakira and Paul Anka, actors Salma Hayek and Tony Shalhoub, writer Amine Maalouf, essayist Nicholas Nassim Taleb... the list is very long and I'll stop it here, but this glimpse will help you putting in perspective the impact of Lebanese on modern culture.

Let's just remember writer and poet Gibran Khalil Gibran, who is considered as one of the most important poets of all times. Born in Lebanon, Gibran made his career in the United States, where 9 million copies of his most famous book, "The Prophet", have been sold. Gibran used to say "Spare me the political events and power struggles, as the whole earth is my homeland and all men are my fellow countrymen". This statement probably epitomizes the dichotomy between culture and politics in Lebanon: politics in Lebanon is as invasive as futile, such that cultural creativity's impact on society becomes neutralized.

Historical Perspectives:

Lebanon has always been at the crossroads of Civilizations. Byblos, located 26 miles north of Beirut is believed to be the oldest continuously-inhabited city in the world and has given its name to the Bible. Lebanon's history is thus tightly linked to the emergence of Civilizations.

The first civilization to settle in Lebanon was the Phoenician, 3 millennia BC. Phoenicians have settled on the Lebanese coast and founded cities such as Tyre, Sidon, Beirut or Byblos. Although sharing common interests and culture, each city was politically independent and run as a city-state. The Phoenicians were very opened to the world. They have mastered sea navigation and created a large network of sea trade routes, establishing trade points all over the Mediterranean. The Phoenicians were also the first civilization to make extensive use of the alphabet, and they are believed to have transmitted the alphabet to the Greeks, who have enhanced it by the introduction of vowels.

The seafaring capabilities of the Phoenicians and their trade abilities brought wealth and prosperity to the city-states, attracting lust of more powerful and centralized neighboring civilizations. Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians succeeded each other in occupying Lebanon. Their reigns have little input over Phoenician culture. City-states were burdened by taxes and expropriation of raw material to spur their respective war efforts. This one-way relationship led to several rebellions of Phoenician cities.

Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and conquered Lebanon in 333 BC. He besieged Tyre for seven months and executed 2,000 of its leading inhabitants after his victory. The Greek Empire presence in Lebanon effectively put an end to Phoenician culture, with the Hellenistic rule taking over all trade routes except Carthage. However, the inhabitants of Lebanon adapted to the Greek Empire and flourished under its dominance, benefitting from the impressive cultural developments made by the Greeks.

In 64 BC, Lebanon was annexed to the Roman Empire. The Roman dominance brought more stability than the Greek one, and allowed more economic prosperity and intellectual activities. Inhabitants of Tyre, Sidon and Byblos were granted Roman citizenship. However, Beirut took the higher status of Colonia, and considerably developed under Roman rule. Large temples and public buildings were erected in Beirut, most notably its law school, where some of the most renowned jurists in the Roman Empire taught. Christianity started to be implemented in Lebanon in the second century AD, but was not as marked in its development as in Syria or Jordan.

In 395 AD, the Roman Empire was divided between the Eastern, or Byzantine part, and the Western part. Lebanon was under the Byzantine rule, but this subdivision did not have any effect on the prosperity of Lebanon, even though corruption was on the rise. It all ended towards the end of the sixth century, when a series of violent earthquakes destroyed Beirut and killed 30,000 of its inhabitants.

This paved the way for the Arabic invasion. The Arabs were on the rise in terms of power and in need of conquering new lands for economic purposes and religious belief. The Arab rule started in the middle of the seventh century, with the Umayyad rule based in Damascus lasting until 750 AD to be replaced by the Abbassids rule based in Baghdad. The Crusaders overtook Lebanon starting 1109 AD. The first Arabic

rule was characterized by openness, prosperity and intellectual development. The Arabs were at the pinnacle of innovation, scientific discoveries and cultural production.

The Arab rule also marked the emergence of the Lebanese mountains as a refuge to minorities and ethnical groups such as the Shia, the Druze or the Maronite. However it is the Crusaders rule that sparked religious tensions in the region. Crusaders were overthrown by the Mamluks, but the Arab culture was starting its decline back then. The Ottoman took over in 1516, a rule that lasted for four centuries without interruption. While benefitting from the Ottoman culture for a century or so, before the slow decline started, Lebanon was also grasping the essential discoveries of the European Renaissance, thanks to the relations between the Maronites and the French and Italians. Lebanon also benefitted from a brief autonomy during the Ottoman rule, an exception in the Levant.

After World War I, the French replaced the Ottomans through a mandate, much less stringent than their colonial rules. It was the first time that Lebanon existed as an entity, with defined borders. Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, based on an awkward agreement that Lebanese have to stay neutral vis-à-vis Arab or Western influence. The agreement was breached over and over again, and Lebanon has known in its 69 years of independence Israeli invasions, occupations and wars, Syrian hegemony and occupation, Palestinian aggressions, Iranian influence, Saudi interference, US manipulation or indifference ... As the Lebanese journalist Georges Naccache said after Lebanon gained its independence, "Two negations don't make a nation"...

This quick glance at 6 thousand years of history highlights the main influences that are governing today's political and cultural situation in Lebanon

Political Situation in Lebanon

Lebanon has shifted from the city-states of the Phoenicians to the Religious Communities-States. The historical absence of a strong and centralized power has still its effects on political life in Lebanon. There are no common goals and targets that unify the Lebanese, but rather alliances that come and go according to each community's interest at a particular point of time

Lebanon politics rely too much on foreign interventions and influences. This was mainly inherited from the long declining period of the Ottoman Empire. While before that Lebanon was ruled by one power, the ottoman rule was characterized by influence and exchanges from Europeans. This duality in foreign intervention still prevails, while the identities of the two powers shift with time (US Influence vs. USSR Influence, Saudi vs. Iran...)

Lebanon has historically been characterized with numerous rebellions and revolts that failed, and this is still the case to date. The last failed rebellion is the Beirut Spring which happened in March 2005 and led to the ousting of the Syrian army from Lebanon. The Beirut Spring was a period of hope for many of us, especially the War Generations to whom coexistence seemed an abstract concept. The possible gains from this rebellion were progressively shut down and the stalemate prevailed once again.

Lebanese society is always busy with politics. Seldom has one society debated that much about politics for no apparent results whatsoever. Political debate in Lebanon is as sterile as political action. It never leads to any tangible result, but sticks to generalities and abstract concepts. The Lebanese war has ended in 1990 and until today electricity is rationed, with no concrete measure implemented for the past 22 years.

Politics are overburdened with an endemic corruption that paralyzes all institutions. This extreme propensity of Lebanese for corruption makes it much easier for foreign powers to gain influence and much difficult for real political actions to take place.

Cultural Situation in Lebanon

Politics have a direct influence on the cultural situation in Lebanon. Considering the quasi-absence of the state, culture in Lebanon relies on personal and private initiatives. Developing the cultural scene is quite challenging and difficult when there is an absence of subventions and State sponsoring towards it. However one constant that Lebanon hanged onto is freedom of expression. Since the State is neither strong nor centralized, freedom of expression never caused any threat to overthrow power.

Culture in Lebanon is a perfect expression of all the different historical and present influences on the country. In the music industry for example we find all kinds of genres, from Lebanese folk to Arab music, classical-influenced, rock, rap, electronic... mainstream and pop Arab music is of course the most successful, and Lebanese singers have gained the status of icons in the Arab world.

In the cinematographic industry, an interesting emergence of young cineastes is taking place, and Lebanese movies are starting to shine in independent film festivals worldwide. One peculiarity of Lebanese cinema is the overwhelming presence of war. This is a definite sign of the impact and psychological havoc the civil war has caused on generations. Creation is a healing process to many Lebanese artists.

As for Lebanese literature, to which I belong to, it is extremely rich in its diversity, whether linguistically with writings in Arabic, French and English, or in content with poems, essays or fiction. Thanks to my program Kitab, I had the opportunity and privilege of meeting much of the Lebanese writers, from all ages and all horizons. Sales of books remain shy though and funding difficult to obtain, often forcing writers to have a side job. Graphic arts face even more difficulties, having tough times to sell paintings or photography in Lebanon

Lebanon has enjoyed a high level of education, whether primary, secondary or tertiary, allowing its citizens to have this openness towards culture. Adult literacy rate in Lebanon in 2007 is 93% according to the World Bank, which is obviously insufficient but nevertheless fair when compared to the region. Education in Lebanon is not a mere mandatory enrollment in school, as the country has 24% of its labor force with tertiary education, a level comparable to Germany and 9% higher than Italy. The American University of Beirut has long enjoyed a regional reputation of excellence.

Education is in my opinion one of the major factors that led to the Arab spring. The relatively high levels of education in Lebanon do not constitute a threat to the State, as we have seen the inherent impermeability of the political structure to any form of rebellion.

Education and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has affected Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, is brutally ongoing in Syria and was obscurely contained in Bahrain. Except Bahrain, all the countries affected by the Arab Spring are “Presidoms”, i.e. republics where the president is in control for a lifetime and transmits power to his son, similarly to kingdoms.

I will focus on Syria and Egypt here as they are the closest geographically and culturally to Lebanon. These regimes used to surf on the Cold War to impose their dictatorships. Aids and subsidies from either the USA or the USSR for power balance were enough to sustain the countries. The end of the Cold War and the emergence of Globalization changed this equation.

In order to join the Global Economy and benefit from the worldwide exchanges, these countries had to raise their game in terms of education, in order to have a labor force capable of managing the incoming and outgoing requests in terms of business. Literacy rate was of 55% in Syria in 1981, against 83% in 2010. In Egypt, Literacy rate went from 55% in 1996 to 72% in 2010.

GDP growth was impressive during these years, with 408% for Egypt from 1990 until 2010, and 381% for Syria. Foreign Direct Investment followed course. Yearly Average FDI in Egypt went from \$824 Million for the period between 1999 and 2004 to \$8.26 Billion. In Syria, figures went from \$199 million to \$1.32 billion. The opening of these economies was successful in bringing in wealth. However, this wealth was concentrated among the hands of a few powerful people.

The final ingredient that boosted the Arab Spring is the Internet. Internet users in Egypt went from 0.6% in 2000 to 36% in 2011, in Syria from 0.2% to 22%. The Internet meant a widespread availability of information in countries where the press was tightly controlled by the state. Hence Syrians and Egyptians became educated, learned freely about what is happening worldwide and saw that they barely benefited from the wealth they were key in generating.

Revolution in Syria

The revolution in Syria came as a surprise in Lebanon, where no one was betting on an imminent breakthrough of the Arab Spring. Syrian regime exerted such a tight control on all levels of its society that it was unthinkable to have in such a short notice a revolution happening. The bloody revolution going on in Syria is fearfully observed from Lebanon. Syria borders Lebanon from the East and the North and is the key player in my country. Syria has always considered Lebanon as one of its provinces and never recognized its independence. The political Lebanon, equally divided as usual, is either betting on an imminent fall of the regime or a victory of Assad forces.

However, the fundamentals of the conflict in Syria seem to be on a longer span than the Lebanese politicians’ expectations. Several factors make me think that the Syrian conflict is here to stay:

- Syria's closest ally is Iran. Syria is key in Iranian implementation of its regional interference. While the numerous economic sanctions imposed on Iran are already hurting its economy, adding a financial support to the Syrian regime further drains the Iranian economy and will lead Iran to change its views regarding its nuclear program.
- The Golan heights, occupied by Israel, have been the calmest border of Israel. While the conflict is going on, no one in Syria has the capacity to cause trouble in the Golan. If the regime falls, most likely Islamists will come to power as with other countries affected by the Arab Spring, and can be a definite source of worries to Israel
- Extremists from all countries are pouring into Syria to fight the Jihad. This alleviates the threats of terrorist attacks in Western countries and in Russia (Chechens).
- Russia has lost a naval base in Libya and lucrative arms contracts. It is making up this loss by selling weapons to the Syrian regime and hanging on to its last naval base in the Mediterranean, in the port of Tartus in Syria

The Future of the Middle East

The outcomes of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were welcomed with skepticism. The rise in power of Islamists raised questions about the achievements of these revolutions. Is freedom enhanced or on the verge of being annihilated? However, it should not be surprising that the Islamists will come to power. During all these decades of totalitarian regimes and repression of freedom, the Islamists were the only ones able to build a sustainable and structured organization. Their influence was not only religious, but also social and educative.

Thus when elections were held, it was natural that Islamists will win when faced with a disorganized opposition that no one really knew about. While revolution was the fruit of spontaneous mobilization, the democratic game relies more on structure, communication and organization. In any cases, it is erroneous to judge now the outcomes of a revolution that happened only a year ago. If revolution is a quick process that allows overthrowing the ruling regime, its aftermath is a long and painful process. The best example is the French Revolution, which occurred in 1789 but took at least a century to materialize into relative freedom and democracy. However, the occurrence of a revolution should be a constant warning sign to anyone trying to impose dictatorship again. Egyptian president Morsi had a taste of this new situation during the latest manifestations in Egypt.

The Arab Monarchies, still spared by the Arab Spring for now, must be extremely wary about the winds of changes blowing on the region. It is highly unlikely that these Monarchies will be left as they are. They will have to implement some drastic changes, distribute their huge wealth more equitably and allow progressively more freedom to the people and in-depth social reforms. These monarchies are safeguarded for the moment by their huge oil and gas reserves, but as we all know these assets are not eternal.

Israel will also witness internal revolts and changes. Since it is a democracy, the changes in Israel will not come as brutally as the Arab dictatorships. Nevertheless, Israel is still based on the realities on 1948, while much has changed. Arab Israelis constitute 21% of the population with very little representation at the Parliament. Ultra-Orthodox Jews are growing in number at a high pace and their influence on Israeli society is starting to constitute problems with the liberals.

The Future of Lebanon

Lebanon will always have two permanent threats that come from its neighbors' cultures. Syria has traditionally considered Lebanon as a province, not an independent country. This idea was further strengthened by 40 years of Baathist rule and tight scrutiny over education. Thus generations of Syrians grew with the conviction that Lebanon does not have an existence as an independent entity. For Israel, Lebanon is considered to be part of the Promised Land. Hence as long as its neighbors are not convinced by its integrity and independency, Lebanon will remain under threat.

Culture and education will remain on the rise. However, a sustainable economic growth in Lebanon is becoming more and more important to retain high potentials, else the drainage of talented Lebanese to foreign countries will remain high and deprive the country from further opportunities to grow, entering into a catch 22 situation that will plunge the country into more difficulties.

Finally, there is a lot of positive development that could come from the Lebanese Diaspora. These great achievers were able to thrive and shine thanks to the opportunities their new countries have offered, but it would be great if they could benefit their mother land from the knowledge, maturity, innovation, creativity and wealth they have gathered. This potentially massive influx of positivity to Lebanon could help initiating a durable change in Lebanon's political system and thus free the country from its demons.

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