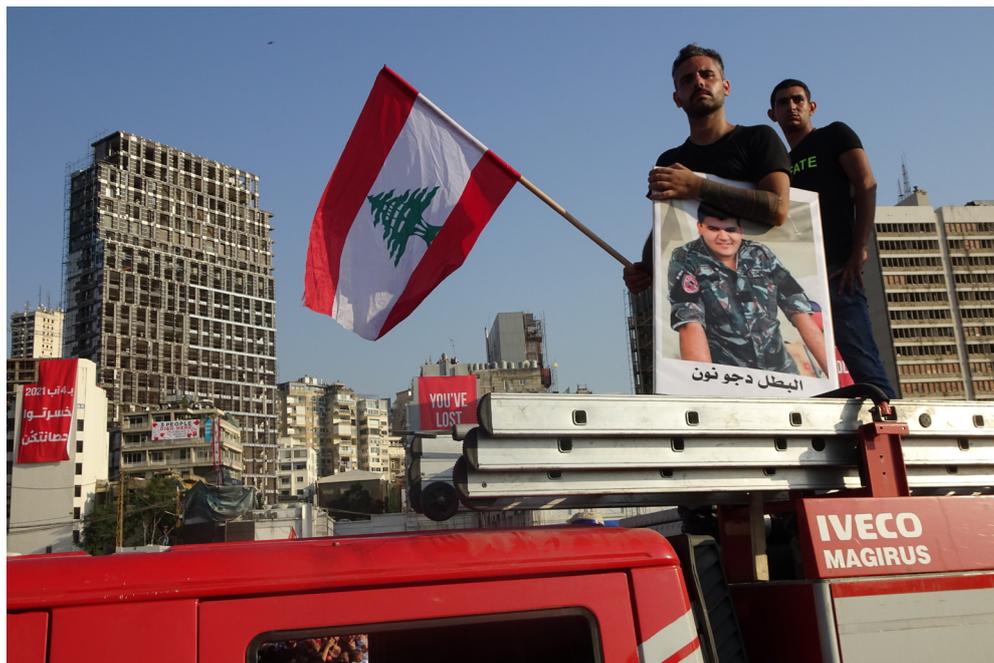


Il Tazebao

LA PRATICA DELL'OBIETTIVO



“Now we know
your roots are in us”

Paper on Lebanon

I quaderni del Tazebao

———— Summer 2021 ————

INDEX

- 3 • **Acknowledgments**
- 3 • **Presentation of the authors**
- 4 • **Introduction**
by Lorenzo Somigli
- 5 • **A chat with Georgi Azar, an American Lebanese Journalist, writing for Arab News**
by Roberta Vaduva
- 9 • **Which exit strategy to get out of the stalemate of confessionalism**
A dialogue with Amin Elias (Oasis) by Lorenzo Somigli
- 11 • **The Lebanese CNRS and the Italian cooperation**
Interview with Mouin Hamze by Lorenzo Somigli and Roberta Vaduva
- 12 • **The Lebanese economic collapse and the possible "exit strategy" according to Wissam Fattouh (Union of Arab Banks)** *by Lorenzo Somigli and Roberta Vaduva*
- 14 • **Does Lebanon need a confederation to break the deadlock of sectarianism?**
A chat with lawyer Roger Eddé by Lorenzo Somigli and Roberta Vaduva
- 17 • **"I am Christian, so what?" Lebanese must have a national identity, not a religious one**
A chat with Mark Gebrael by Roberta Vaduva
- 19 • **"Cooperation between peoples saves lives: I bear witness to it". The story of Roula Khadra (Arab Water Council)** *by Lorenzo Somigli and Roberta Vaduva*
- 20 • **MedPorts, Interview with Philippe Guillaumet (Port of Marseille) and Luca Lupi (Port of Civitavecchia)**
by Tarek Hussein and Lorenzo Somigli
- 22 • **Beirut without the port: a joke that is not funny!**
by Roberta Vaduva
- 28 • **A new government for Lebanon and an urgent reform. Where is Lebanon going?**
A chat with Talal Khrais (National News Agency) by Lorenzo Somigli
- 33 • **From the Roman legions to federal Lebanon, an essay into the roots of devolution (thanks to Iad Boustany)** *by Roberta Vaduva*
- 35 • **Decentralization: the missed reform**
A chat with Elie Elias by Lorenzo Somigli
- 36 • **"À propos du Liban et de l'Afghanistan.**
Un dialogue avec Salvatore Lombardo" by Lorenzo Somigli.
- 39 • **"Lebanese impasse: a way out"**
by Maroun El Moujabber
- 42 • **Dialogue after our return from Lebanon**
Lorenzo Somigli and Roberta Vaduva
- 47 • **El Hob Gameel**
by Gianni Bonini

Acknowledgments



One word sums up our trip to Lebanon like no other: family. Because in addition to deepening and direct knowledge of the facts, which allowed us to go to the heart of the problems, a rare commodity nowadays, bonds were born that we will always carry with us, like the memory of this wonderful land. A heartfelt thank you to our Lebanese family and to all those who made our trip unique and unforgettable.

Presentation of the authors

Lorenzo Somigli, Journalist and press office. He cultivates the art of doubt and the aptitude to probe the hypothesis of reality. A reality to be investigated in the dynamics of power and in the mechanisms of subjugation and construction of consensus. Analyse the others to get to know us.



Roberta Vaduva, editor, and Middle East analyst. The “enlarged Mediterranean” is the home of naturally brotherly peoples and the centre of a complex puzzle of global balances and actors. We can no longer avoid getting to know it.

Introduction

by Lorenzo Somigli

To tell the facts one must be there, one must be crossed by time and penetrated by history, even stunned, confused in the senses, transported. The meditation on experience is coming into its own. Time - a fascinating word correlated with the Greek verb *temno*, to cut and with the Latin *templum*, separate place - is unrepeatable. *"In the same river we are and we are not"* intuited **Heraclitus**. **Either you are there, or you are not there**, and every perspective is distorted, error insinuates thought.

Every segment of time and, even more so at the molecular level, every happening is cast in a larger and more elusive complexity. *"The Origin loves to hide"* vaticinated the same. One must try **of analysis and understanding**. It is necessary to *"look far, see near"* to quote the late **Philippe Daverio**: to grasp complexity as an interweaving of times and histories, noting the salience of detail and the mockery of exceptions. More so today.

At the beginning of the **Short Century** we were taught by an Italian journalist, the illustrious father of all correspondents but unjustly misunderstood for his, albeit late, adhesion to Fascism. Luigi Barzini, fished from Fanfulla by **Luigi Albertini**, another noble father of our press, left for the Far East. He arrives in China and



sees death everywhere after the Boxers' revolt. He lands in Japan. Before his eyes he saw the outcome of Emperor **Matsuhito Meiji's** reforms, as depicted in **Hayao Miyazaki's** suave film *The Wind Rises* dedicated to Jirō Horikoshi, designer of the infamous Zero. It is the Japan born after the landing of **Commodore Perry** and from the ashes of the bombing of **Shimonoseki**. And so, it tells the story of the **Russo-Japanese war** that culminated in the immense massacre of Mukden, a war so far away but already massive.

When Barzini analyzes Japan or China, he speaks – and this is another notable trait – in retrospect of Italy: we are little accustomed to technology and trade, we do **not study English or German**, we study the Classics too much. On this last point we do not agree with him, because in the Classics we find our **school of freedom** and the **medicament** to the evils of the world, but after all one cannot agree on everything, not even with Barzini. *“Guardar lontano, veder vicino”* (“To look far, to see near”), a life that of ours inflamed by intuition, by the thirst for knowledge, by the restlessness, by **the anxiety to go**. That all of us Mediterraneans feel. We will have to wait decades to see, with the same voracity of life, Kerouac leave for Des Moines, fall in love with Terry in Frisco and exclaim *“finally New Orleans”*. This has been our journey. The love that penetrated us. To quote the song *“Beirut Set El Donia”* that cadenced our Lebanese steps: *“alan ear-afna ‘ana judhurak daribat fina”*, “now we know that your roots are in us”.

Lorenzo Somigli

**A chat with Georgi Azar, an American Lebanese journalist,
writing for Arab News**

(previously for L’Orient Today and An- Nahar)

by Roberta Vaduva - July 2nd, 2021

What is the political situation like in Lebanon now? What are the major difficulties preventing the formation of a government?

“Our constitution stipulates that both the President and Prime Minister-designate agree on the makeup of the government together. Unfortunately, there is not timeline or deadline that can force both men to the table. It’s been 10 months now and both President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri have failed to see eye to eye, with each instead focused on their own individual calculations. In the case of Aoun and his son-in-law Gebran Bassil, a presidential hopeful after Aoun’s term ends, observers have noted that they are attempting to name a third of the ministers in the government in order to secure a blocking third or effective veto power. By controlling the government, observers say they can play a larger role if parliamentary elections scheduled for next year are not held and a presidential void ensues. Meanwhile, Hariri is accused of not wanting to form a government period, given his precarious relationship with Saudi Arabia. Observers accuse him of not wanting to form a government before mending ties with the Kingdom, as forming a government without regional support, i.e financial support, is tantamount to political suicide given Lebanon’s economic collapse”.

How did the country deal with the pandemic? And what does the situation look like now?

“Lebanon’s dealing with the pandemic can be summarized with three time periods. The first period is right after the pandemic broke out, with Lebanon following the lead of most countries and implementing a total lockdown, shutting down its airport for some time, then requiring mandatory quarantines, limited capacity in restaurants, clubs closed etc. During that time, which lasted until October, November 2020, I would say, the situation was relatively stable, and hospitals were coping fine with daily infections.

The second period, right before Christmas, is when things went sideways. Authorities decided to loosen restrictions in a bid to attract expats to boost the economy.

Some indoor clubs were permitted to open and capacity in bars and restaurants was increased after the hospitality syndicate lobbied policy makers extensively.

In the days after New Years’ eve, daily infections began skyrocketing, reaching around 6,000 to 7,000 per day within weeks.

Hospitals were on the brink of collapse and another 24h lockdown was implemented for around 2 to 3 months before the situation was brought under control as the national inoculation program kicked off. The third phase is the one Lebanon is currently witnessing, which is relatively stable, cases have dropped to around 100 to 150 per day and the vaccine roll out is going smoothly”.



Why is the economy so stagnant that it has “forced” the government to impose a tax on WhatsApp calls in 2019? What does the country’s economy primarily depend on?

“The economy has been stagnant for years, with Lebanon turning into a rentier economic model. In essence, we relied on remittances from expats to try to keep our budget and trade deficits in check. As relations with expats, the Gulf and the international community as a whole soured, given local political developments, the amount of dollars coming in simply couldn’t catch up with the amount of dollars going out, which is when cracks began to show prompting central bank Gov. Riad Salameh to implement financial engineering schemes to attract even more dollars. The house of cards came tumbling down when the government took the decision to implement a whats app tax, causing mass protests that forced banks to shutter for weeks on end. Days later, the number of losses sustained by the banking sector which indebted the state for years became apparent, around 120 billion dollars. Since the end of the civil war, Lebanon had a modest agricultural and manufacturing output, but as I said its economy primarily depended on foreign remittances from its diaspora located in the Gulf, Africa, and the rest of the world. I like to say that Lebanon’s biggest export is its youth and talent”.

The Lebanese army: the influential General Aoun and international funding. Especially the USA and France have announced large sums of money to be allocated to the Lebanese army. Tell us a little about the importance and the composition, including the community, of the army.

“The Lebanese army, in essence, is the last state institution still on its feet, barely, which is why the international community is trying to safeguard it. It is low on food, supplies and reports have emerged in recent weeks and months suggesting an increased number of desertions. The army, for years, has been one of the few national symbols that all Lebanese, from all regions, can fall behind and support, making it more important. Its internal security role cannot be downplayed. The Leb-



anese army includes Lebanese from all sects, Christian, Sunni, Shia and Druze, which also plays a role in transforming it into a national symbol of unity. I'm certain that the international community would like to avoid the disintegration of the army and a repeat of what happened in the civil war, when the army collapsed, and its members joined their respective sectarian militias".

Hezbollah is an actor of some weight in the Lebanese institutional scenario. How can it be positioned? (I'll explain better: we can't consider it an institution "in order" for all intents and purposes, but neither is it an organization to be disregarded).

"Hezbollah holds the biggest weight currently within the local political landscape. Throughout the years since 2005, it has managed to morph itself into the de facto ruler of Lebanon, holding the final say on issues of peace, war, and security etc, while delegating the more 'mundane' tasks dealing with governance, economy, and the like to its local allies. Unfortunately, the alliance of mafia and militia, as several analysts have dubbed it, has proved fateful for Lebanon. Neither party or group, including Hezbollah, is seemingly willing to take responsibility for the crisis or offer any viable solutions, as doing so would chip away at their political gains and standing. What is interesting is that Hezbollah, which has for long railed against the west and its 'attempts to interfere in Lebanese affairs', is opening itself and Lebanon up to such attempts by standing on the side lines while the economic and security collapse accelerates".

The tragic harbor explosion in August 2020: who are the culprits if they can be identified? How did the entire country deal with such a tragedy?

"That's a tough question as the investigation is shrouded in mystery and mired with political interferences. However, what investigative journalists have uncovered is that the ammonium nitrate was purchased by a known associate of Syrian President Bashar Assad. The investigation, now being led Judge Tarek Bitar, is looking into who permitted or paved the way for the nitrate to be stored at the port and who knew that it was stored there for all those years. The blast was perhaps the most devastating event to hit Lebanon since the civil war and was a hard pill to swallow given our realization that justice will most probably never be served. What was heart-warming, however, is how Lebanese from all walks of life and regions came together in the immediate aftermath, tending to the wounded, offering shelter and supplies and helping in the clean-up of Beirut which was devoid of any governmental help".

Roberta Vaduva

Which exit strategy to get out of the stalemate of confessionalism?

A dialogue with Amin Elias (Oasis)

di Lorenzo Somigli - July 30, 2021

Italy and Lebanon have strong bonds of friendship. During the Grand Dukedom of Tuscany Cosimo II received Fakhr el-Din II. Can we trace the beginning of tolerance between religions in Lebanon back to him?

*"Indeed, It is with **Fakhr el Din II** that the Levant knows for the first time after the Islamic expansion a model of coexistence between two different religious communities: **Druze** (heterodox Muslim community) and **Maronites** (Catholic Syriac Christians). In their historical sources, the Maronites clearly express their feeling of proud and equity within the socio-political model elaborated by Fakhr el Din II".*

How many are the credits of Ottoman and French experiences to Lebanon constitution?

*"The Lebanese Constitution, which was elaborated in 1926 under the French mandate, is directly influenced by the Constitution of the Third French Republic. However, It is wise to recognise the fact that **the idea of the Constitution was enhanced in the Levant by the Ottoman Empire when the first Ottoman Constitution was adopted in 1776**".*

Can we deepen the experience of the Cenacle and its input to modern Lebanon?

*"The main input of the **Lebanese Cenacle** to modern Lebanon was a **cultural and intellectual one**. The main aim of the Cenacle was fixed by his founder **Michel Asmar in 1946**. For him, the independence of Lebanon in 1943 is a **starting point to build the Lebanese Home**, as singular and humanistic identity and entity, as modern State, as social and national solidarity, as a platform for an international and **humanistic dialogue among cultures, languages, religions, and civilisations**".*



In the Middle East there have been two coherent state building processes: Turkey and Lebanon. Both led to the construction of states trying to emulate the Western example, albeit with their respective differences. In one they tried to limit the influence of religion which then came back strong, in the other they started from mutual recognition but the differences exploded. Is there an “exit strategy” from confessionalism crisis?

“In my spirit, I think that the coexistence model in Lebanon between two main religious and cultural groups, Christians and Muslims, has failed. The main reason behind this failure is the difference in aims, aspirations and way of living between the two groups. Facing this reality, we could think about two “exit strategies”:

1. **A form of secularism based on the notion of the Person** (as elaborated by the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier) where are reconciled: the individual, otherness (i.e the community) and spirituality.
2. **A system of federation or confederation** where each community has its own territory where it could establish its own way of living”.

Is there a possibility of a secular changeover? Can Islam be reconciled with secularism?

“Yes, on one condition. The Muslims should renew their system of thinking which was established in the XI century, and go ahead in accepting modernity which means: separation between the State and the religion (Islam), accepting the modern values as equality, freedom of conscience, expression and religion, citizenship, primacy of reason and rationality over tradition, separation between the spiritual belonging to the umma and the socio-political belonging to the national and modern State, etc...”.

Lorenzo Somigli



The Lebanese CNRS and the Italian cooperation

Interview with Mouin Hamze by Lorenzo Somigli - August 10, 2021



We meet Prof. **Mouin Hamze, Secretary General of CNRS**, at the Beirut Digital District after a visit to the Shiite neighbourhood of the city. He gives us an alarming picture of the situation the country is living. A crisis which also directly involves CNRS: *“Only one out of our eight locations is still usable now. In addition, due to the **lack of electricity**, we have lost our archives, the work of years has disappeared. **It’s like they killed us**”.*

An **organic crisis**, child of the political gridlock and financial crash, is tearing Lebanon apart. Hamze is clear about the possible ways out of the crisis:

*“We cannot put any hope in the current political class. On them, on all of them, no project of rebirth can be founded. Lebanon needs a new political class that bases its legitimacy on a policy of destruction. A high tide that submerges and sucks up the old to make room for the new. A “new” that, however, is not born from the ashes of the old system. Because the “old” is only fertile ground of corruption, cronyism and selfishness. For this reason - he underlines - **a new social pact is needed**”.*

Confessionalism itself, the peculiarity of the Country of the Cedar, the only Arab state with a strong Christian presence at all levels, is no longer the decisive factor for political and especially social stability: today it seems to be causing not a few and negligible problems. **The Lebanese social contract no longer holds up, it needs a new Mediterranean breeze.**

One of the resources to draw on to help Lebanon overcome this continuous crisis is the **cooperation** of which Italy is the leader and of which the **CIHEAM of Bari** is one of the highest expressions, one of the most appreciated at Mediterranean level. Mouin regularly collaborates with the aforementioned Italian organization.

“Italy is different. Italy comes to help people and communities improve their skills and capacities; it incentivizes sustainability”.

One of the flagships of the Italian initiative in Lebanon is the **Cana scientific boat** donated in 2008.

by **Lorenzo Somigli**

The Lebanese economic collapse and the possible “exit strategy” according to Wissam Fattouh (Union of Arab Banks)

by **Lorenzo Somigli and Roberta Vaduva** - August 10, 2021



It is an overall crisis. It is the **collapse** of a system that has not been able to exploit its golden years. Lebanon is experiencing one of the darkest moments in its recent history. **Wissam Fattouh, Secretary General of the Union of Arab Banks**, outlines a worrying picture, welcoming us to his office in the Mina Al Hosn district of Beirut. The Union of Arab Banks, founded in 1973 in Beirut, is a valuable player aiming to **act as a bridge** between Arab banks and the global financial system. In addition to Lebanese banks, its

members include banks from **Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Bahrain, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Libya, Palestine, Qatar, Mauritania, Oman, Sudan, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, Yemen, Djibouti and Somalia.**

The information he shares with us, from a report of August 2021, depicts a broken economy: **poverty index at 55%** in 2020, **unemployment rate** rising from 18.5% in 2019 to 36.9% in 2020 and expected to top 41.4% at the end of the year, **foreign currency reserves halved in a year and a half**, the banking sector experienced a contraction of total capital dropping by just over \$4 billion between October 2019 and May 2021, the purchase of foreign currency securities dropped by 44% in the same period. In addition to this, as he explains, there are Lebanon's **structural delays**, namely *"the lack of an accessible infrastructure network, electricity, which is essential for any activity, is cut off, the internet does not work"*, but also *"a weak and still very backward agriculture and manufacturing that is almost completely non-existent"*.

All of them are symptoms of a lack of diversification that is felt at times of general crisis. According to Fattouh, the **private sector** should be encouraged as an element of renewal and dynamism in society, and new privatisations should be proposed because the public sector has proved itself inadequate and corrupt.

This is another reason why the "Lebanese question" should be put on top of the agenda during the **G20 meeting in Rome on 30 and 31 October.**

This could be an opportunity for Italy to concretely help the Country of the Cedars:

*"At the moment, only France is committed to Lebanon, passing its position off as European's one. Their attitude, however, is much **more predatory** than that of other countries like Italy. I like to recall that in 2006, **thanks to Prodi**, Israel's attacks on our country were stopped. **This is a concrete help that we need"**.*

Continuing analysing the data, making a quick comparison between the growth - in the Lebanese case we speak of decrease - of the GDP in **2019 and that of 2020, the scenario that emerges is not at all reassuring: in 2019, the GDP recorded a decrease of -6.7%** while **in 2020, the contraction was -25%, from \$ 52.6 billion to \$ 19.1 billion**, always in US currency. Needless to say, no one expects growth in the current year.

Is it too late to save the Lebanese banking system?

*"It is never too late, it all depends on politics, a politics that has misallocated the resources of the Lebanese people and continues to do so by getting into debt with the **Central Bank**, a Central Bank that, despite being aware of the impossibility of getting the money back, continues to lend it to the government. At the end of the day, if you can't trust your government, **then who can you trust?"***

Lorenzo Somigli, Roberta Vaduva

Does Lebanon need a confederation to break the deadlock of sectarianism?

A chat with lawyer Roger Eddé

by Lorenzo Somigli and Roberta Vaduva - August 18, 2021



Territory before religion. The territory is the place of **communities**, the place where life and socio-economic relations are substantiated, where **formulas of coexistence, reciprocity and collaboration** have been successfully experimented for centuries. According to **Roger Eddé**, lawyer, entrepreneur and politician, the territory is the starting point for overcoming the political and institutional deadlock in Lebanon caused by confessionalism.

We had the pleasure of meeting and being hosted by him and his wife **Alice** during our reportage in **Lebanon**. The architecture of their wonderful house and the harmonious garden summarise the relationships built up over the centuries between **Italy and Lebanon**. Roger had mentioned to us some proposals to **reform the institutions**. We contacted him shortly after our return to continue these stimulating reflections together.

For internally divided states, such as Lebanon, the **confederal** option has proved to be the only way out of the stalemate before the final break-up. *“Our history has made us a **republic of minorities**. We have taken in persecuted people, such as the Shiites during the Abbasids, and other persecuted people, who found a home mainly in the south, from Persia. The core of our state was born at the end of a terrible massacre between*

*Sunnis and Maronites in the 19th century. When Lebanon was created by the League of Nations, it took the presence of the **Maronite patriarch** and the **Sunni mufti** to keep us united and to underline our belonging to the Arab world. This historical path has meant that everyone feels the bond to their religious community much stronger than that to the nation. **This is a problem that we have to solve**”.*

One way out could be to enhance the relationship with its territory through a confederal reform of Lebanon.

Roger, who has gathered around him a diverse group of experts and professionals, has always advocated a **comprehensive reform** of the Lebanese political system.

*“We have to put an end to what is effectively a system of privileges that guarantees a few privileges and income while excluding a large part of the population. We call this mafia al **Manzouma**”.*

Roger tells us that there have also been previous attempts at reform that have not yielded the expected results. The lawyer calls for Lebanon to be declared a **failed state**: *“This would liquidate the government and parliament. A **transitional government** would be appointed, made up of authoritative figures, which would be called upon to ”.*

Before any kind of reform, the problem of the irregular militias scattered throughout the country must be resolved.

*“Many communities have their own militias, which must now all be disarmed. As for Hezbollah, **we cannot tolerate the presence of a state within a state**, operating like the godfather of the mafia. Resolution 1599 must be implemented, and Hezbollah must be disarmed”.* In order to frame the problem of Hezbollah’s presence, he also mentions

the news, highlighted by the Jerusalem Post on 14 August and taken up by a large part of the Middle Eastern media, of the dense **network of tunnels**, which also allow the passage of motorbikes and vehicles, built underneath the whole of Lebanon, which is even “bigger than that of Hamas in Gaza”. This network, built roughly after 2006 with funding from Iran and North Korea, is used by Hezbollah to move troops from its



headquarters in Beirut to the **Beqaa Valley and southern Lebanon**. This was revealed in a detailed report by the Israeli ALMA Center.

*“The new parliament should have a clear mandate to abolish confessionalism and open up the multilevel decentralisation of power, i.e. municipal and district **power**”.*

Decentralisation must take place on a geographical basis: *“We can safely say, and there are plenty of examples, that **the centralised system is the main obstacle to prosperity in Lebanon**. On the contrary, in the **local communities there** are the social, political, intellectual resources, the right social capital to give our land a new impetus. In my vision, **the districts would be the core of local self-government of the confederation**”.* Foreign policy, coordination and harmonisation of local policies and the army would remain with the central government. A formula *“inspired by the Swiss example, but **daughter of Lebanon’s history**”.*

This would be a *“pragmatic transition”* that would require, as an accompaniment, a new **electoral law** inspired by the **French double turn** that *“has guaranteed a moderate government”*. Faced with an electoral law that, in any case, compresses the will of the electorate in the second round by rewarding those who are less distant from their positions, Roger recommends, for elected assemblies such as local ones, the **proportional system** so as to *“give full representation to all the components of society”*. These details are also part of a **‘check and balance’** principle that Roger often refers to.

In line with this principle, it is essential to guarantee the independence of the judiciary, which otherwise cannot work for the good of the citizens.

An emblematic case, says Roger, is that of the investigation into the dramatic explosion at the **port of Beirut**, for which the **culprits** have not yet been identified, partly because of the difficulties of



investigating and the frequent meddling of political power. About the port of Beirut, Roger tells us: *“The case of the port of Beirut is very **emblematic** of how our country is run. Until 1999, the port was privately managed, and it worked. Then the government took it over and entrusted it to a **commission, which is still active**, and we don’t really know what it has produced. It has certainly misappropriated the port’s income and it*

has certainly not been able to control the warehouse as it should have done”.

To break this **distorted and dysfunctional mechanism**, a courageous reform is needed so that *“the citizen is once again fully involved in decision-making mechanisms, has a concrete impact on the government of the territory, which answers to him directly, without mediation and antechamber. He knows where and how his taxes are spent and can protest directly when he is not convinced. This is an epoch-making change compared to now: only in this way will we begin to perceive ourselves as Lebanese and to have the common good at heart”.*

Lorenzo Somigli, Roberta Vaduva

“I am Christian, so what? ”

Lebanese must have a national identity, not a religious one

by Roberta Vaduva - August 20, 2021

His name is **Mark**. He is a young entrepreneur, 29 years old, Christian, speaks three languages perfectly, Arabic, French and English. What else? He lives in Lebanon and his dream is to get his visa as soon as possible. **Direction France** - former colonial master of Lebanon as Raghida Dergham called it.

A France that continues, undaunted, to trust the current corrupt Lebanese political class by limiting itself to organising international conferences and collecting money for the Country of Cedars.

“They don’t help us with money. We need physical support. We want to see a more physically committed France in Lebanon. We need to feel their presence and we need them to make this incapable leadership feel it. The money will end up in the hands of the politicians, it will go to finance Hezbollah. Do we, perhaps, need this?”



Speaking of money: the ‘**government**’, this mythological creature in the Lebanese decision-making landscape, has promised economic aid to the victims of 4 August.

Who has ever seen this money? It circulates in the halls of Parliament, but on the streets of the country it hardly arrives.

“They have been in power for more than fifteen years, they don’t want to get out of their

seats, they are getting richer and richer at our expense, and they are more untouchable than ever. My cousins and grandparents live near the harbour". It was a tragedy that day. A psychological trauma for the whole country.

"There is a further problem today: not **Hezbollah**, but the power that the organisation holds. It is an **unwieldy presence**. It commands our house. Especially **for us Christians, the memory of the war is still alive**. I was lucky enough not to experience it myself, but my parents and grandparents told me about it, they themselves are the image of the atrocities of war. We, **the new generation, grew up** - or rather, we were brought up - **with the idea of religious affiliation**. We have always been told to defend our faith, but

what is the point nowadays? We are one country, one community, we must be united for a prosperous and stable Lebanon. Politics marches heavily on the issue of religion, it draws its sap from this existential fracture that snakes through our society. The very legitimacy of the political elite is based on this: when something is not to their liking, they accuse each other, deliberately and cunningly marking the religious faith of their adversary, the political faith being secondary! With what result? No one cares about the Lebanese people, no one cares about us. No one has any more hopes or expectations from politics. Will they form a government? Will they not form it? Absolutely nothing will change.



First, we must change the Lebanese mentality, which is still based too much on religious sectarianism: if I need something, I turn, first, to the closest Christian personality I know. Above all, we young people must take up new weapons of change: the exodus of Lebanese youth is very felt and suffered. It is more difficult to leave the country than to stay and fight for a living".

Roberta Vaduva

“Cooperation between peoples saves lives: I bear witness to it”

The story of Roula Khadra (Arab Water Council)

by Lorenzo Somigli e Roberta Vaduva - August 24, 2021



Woman, professional, miracle of international cooperation. During our reportage we met **Roula Khadra**, Hydraulic Engineer and first woman elected in the **Arab Water Council**. She had to make her way through endless obstacles and vicissitudes to assert her undoubted competence.

Roula told us about her difficult childhood in Lebanon: *“I was born in a country where there is never a last war, every war is the penultimate one. When we were children, we had to cross a minefield to go to school: our mother walked before us and we put our feet where she had walked before”*.

From Lebanon to Italy thanks to the cooperation among people: *“Since 1997 I am in Italy thanks to the Italian cooperation that allowed me to continue my education and to have a perspective that I would have never had”*. Roula has retraced through the photos the various projects carried out, starting from some in Lebanon in the Beqaa Valley or one in the Dead Sea, and she also referred to the many difficulties encountered as a woman: *“I have always had to prove that I can do better than anyone else. **Cooperation among peoples has changed my life, now I am committed to others”***.

Lorenzo Somigli, Roberta Vaduva

MedPorts, Interview with Philippe Guillaumet (Port of Marseille) and Luca Lupi (Port of Civitavecchia)

by Tarek Hussein and Lorenzo Somigli - August 27, 2021



A common voice of the Mediterranean ports, common objectives, and requests to be asserted with the institutional actors but also projects, opportunities, sharing of best practices. **On this basis MEDports was born.** MEDports is an association based in Marseille with the aim to bring together **twenty-three port authorities** of the Mediterranean, the geopolitical sea par excellence, through which about 70% of commercial traffic passes, for a total of 750 million tons per year. The association includes the Italian ports of **Rome, Taranto and Venice**, a large presence of **Spanish and North African** ports without forgetting Slovenia with Koper.

MEDports develops **forms of collaboration** with all the strategic players that revolve around port communities, starting with local and European institutions – an authoritative Mediterranean voice is necessary at the European tables – and from universities such as the Arab University of **Alexandria**.

MEDports' action was at the center of a dialogue promoted by Lorenzo Somigli, journalist, and Tarek Hussein, a Maritime Law student. Speakers included Luca Lupi, Head of the Cabinet Office, Institutional Relations and Institutional Activities of the **Port System Authority of the Central-Northern Tyrrhenian Sea**, and **Philippe Guillaumet**, Secretary General of MEDports and Head of European and International Projects of the **Port of Marseille Authority**.

Philippe Guillaumet presented the association as follows: ***“The Mediterranean is at the center of global maritime routes and is the perfect place to establish connections and synergies. Project participants are clear in their minds that cooperation is fundamental: first, we work to attract investments and to develop common policies, then the single port can autonomously aspire to improve itself. But it is good to reiterate it: together we build a future of sustainable growth”.***

Forms of solidarity were also born through the **MedPorts network**, such as after the explosion of the Port of Beirut on 4 August 2020.

“The port of Beirut is part of MEDports - explained Luca Lupi - and we immediately committed ourselves to helping Lebanon, which has always had an essential economic centre in the port of Beirut. In the three-year program 2020-2023 there is a broad involvement in the port of Beirut and we count, as soon as possible, to be able to organize a meeting in Lebanon in order to better understand the needs and study together a relaunch strategy”.

Tarek Hussein, Lorenzo Somigli



Beirut without the port: a joke that is not funny!

by Roberta Vaduva - September 7, 2021



During the August 4 protests, on the streets of Beirut, as I followed the crowd heading towards the port, I was approached by a young girl who was constantly waving her flag, the Lebanese flag.

She politely warned me to pay attention to my bag, if possible, wear it over my shoulder in a crowd to avoid someone taking it away from me. Her name is Lea and the first thing I noticed about her, was her grit. In her eyes shone the light of **revolution**. Of that tacit revolution that each of us experiences inwardly, within ourselves and between ourselves - a condition that every Lebanese has experienced or been forced to experience at least once in his or her life - and that, every time it occurs, gives you a new, greater strength by virtue of which you feel immortal for a while, but with the same **impetuosity with which** it penetrates the body and the spirit, so it also abandons them. A revolution that is the daughter of that which takes place externally, and children, as we know, do not always resemble their parents. The following is an interpretation of the facts through her eyes because Lea was a protagonist of the revolution and of the reconstruction of Beirut. Of a Beirut, which, however, is not able to give back even a crumb of what Lea did for the city and its inhabitants.

*"The Revolution in Lebanon begins on **October 17, 2019** because the telecommunications minister decides to impose a tax on WhatsApp calls, despite knowing that the communication platform is free across the globe. **The Lebanese use WhatsApp a lot***

*as if it were almost a telephone operator and waking up knowing that you must pay a tax in the amount of \$ 6, does not allow you to sleep peacefully. It is not because of the \$6 in itself - which today would correspond to **9,000 Lebanese liras** more or less - but because of the **lack of transparency and greed of the political class**: if you multiply \$6 by the number of Lebanese populations, you get a huge sum of money that would end up in the pockets of politicians without the citizens having the right to know anything. **At that point people took to the streets.***

*I was Paris, from 2017 to 2019 I lived in France. On October 21, 2019 I returned to Lebanon. The Revolution, as mentioned before, happens on the 17th: knowing my people and my country I thought it would always be the usual demonstrations. A few people gather, take to the streets, vandalize in protest until the police intervene with tear gas or water tanks to disperse the crowd. In the evening it all ends, everyone returns to their homes and the next day we wake up and go back to our lives as if nothing had happened. **This is the constant pattern of all the protests I was used to seeing in Lebanon until October 2019.***



*I watched the first protest on TV and I was very skeptical and indifferent to everything that was going on, after all, we knew even then that corruption was rampant in the halls of parliament and government. On the morning of October 18, I woke up and I was watching TV and I noticed something that I had never seen before in Lebanon: **all Lebanese, of any religious faith and any political affiliation, were in the***

downtown area and they were all waving only the Lebanese flag, the official flag.

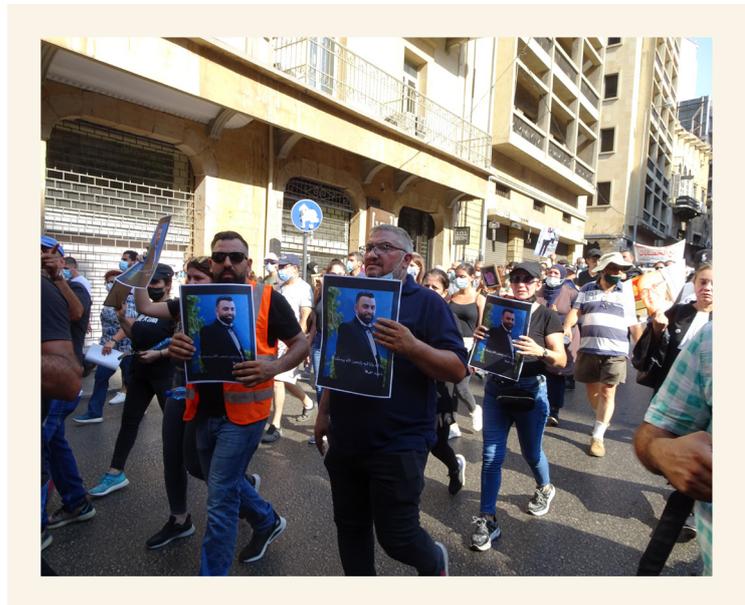
*I really thought that this was the **wind of long-awaited change**. So, I picked up my **flag** and joined other people to breathe this wind of change. At first it was a spontaneous movement, nothing premeditated or organized beforehand. Already after the first week, people started bonding with each other and creating WhatsApp and Telegram groups.*

***Suddenly the Lebanese rediscovered politics:** many independent figures, freed from ties of religion or political affiliation, expressed their intention to run in the elections.*

Over time we became very organized and started to “go on missions” like the military: we did some **raids in Parliament** with the intent of showing them that we are in control, not the other way around.

When we began to gather periodically in front of the government headquarters, the politicians, for their part, began to send their assistants to us, each with their own messages, just to light that fire that not so long ago animated the civil war and inflamed the souls of the Lebanese. At this point the **Revolution becomes political**. But we did not let ourselves be discouraged, nor did we fall into their trap. On the contrary, all this pushed us to do more. We asked ourselves, “**Will this cheap game of yours really work against millions of people who are protesting for the same cause?**”

Slowly, though, we became suspicious of the Revolution itself: of how we were leading it, living it, and what we were directing it toward. It was our first revolution after all. We fell prey to millions of doubts and the violence increased as well.



We are the only country in the Middle East that is regressing instead of progressing. They used to call us the Switzerland of the East. **We were the only country to have trains in the region; today there are railroad tracks and the words “station”** on a building, but there are no trains. You want me to make you laugh? They opened a bar inside the ‘station’, “station bar”! I’ll say no more. **How resilient are we Lebanese? I just can’t figure it out and I never will.**

We know about secret bank accounts owned by politicians, money deposited in foreign banks, islands owned by them all over the world, as well as houses and villas; **Hezbollah is the puppet of Iran, the real master of Lebanon**. Hezbollah started out as a religious sect in Lebanon, but, over time, it formed itself into a political party and now controls all other parties and politicians above all, all must compromise with Hezbollah by accepting the rules of the game dictated by Tehran.

"In 2022 there will be elections, or rather, there should be."

Currently we are not sure if they will let us vote or not. Because if we do go to the polls, there will be "new blood", many independents will stand for election and **at least half of Parliament will be renewed**. This means that this replaced half, will lose its job. The political class wants us to understand that it is the only dispenser of salvation of the people: during the last electoral campaign, four years ago, the politicians, to ensure the vote, have "donated", each, 100 dollars to their community.

"I'll try to briefly tell you what happened on August 4, 2020."

We were protesting as usual, when suddenly something strange happened. There was a fire in one of the containers in the port. A large quantity of ammonium nitrate was found in one of these containers, and we still do not know who it belongs to and who



brought it to us. We do **not know whether it is the fault of Israel that the port of Jaffa is threatened by ours**. Before the explosion occurred, there were plans to further expand the port of Beirut to make it more welcoming and facilitate import-export mechanisms because as you well know, we do not produce anything! Plus, **the port is in the hands of Hezbollah, he is the landlord**.

After the explosion, the city literally died: imagine what Beirut is without the port. **A port city, without a port: the worst of oxymorons.**

We have cleaned up and cleaned up a bit, making it more presentable, with the help of voluntary associations, NGOs, the population - I personally, alone, **have cleaned 48 houses**. My parents' house was destroyed. The police and the army, who should have given us a hand, after all it was their job, they had to clean up, just watched the work, sitting comfortably, calmly, eating their meals while we worked.

We could not prevent it, for the first fire enveloped the harbour side in a blackish cloud, impeding the view. I, who lived on the sixth floor of a glass building, saw only the black sky: I did not abandon myself in panic, I opened all the windows to avoid explosions and rushed down the stairs **knocking on all the doors to invite my neighbours to do the same**. I also had to report to work that day, but I was terrified of walking on

rubble. What if it happens again? That was my only thought. I called a friend of mine who works as a firefighter who reassured me, but he didn't tell me about the nitrate, he didn't know either.

After that we rebuilt Beirut: brick by brick, glass by glass, house by house thanks to donations from the diaspora and the infinite generosity and solidarity of the Lebanese.



*On August 8, four days after the explosion, it was a Saturday, I remember as if it were yesterday, people were in the streets again. This time, however, it was something political: it was no longer the free Lebanese who were protesting for the common cause, but it was the Lebanese who reflected themselves in a religious sect, in a political group. This time we witnessed and were victims of a heavy attack by the army, which did not hesitate to use tear gas against us. They didn't limit themselves to just plastic bullets, we saw rifles too! I returned home with a wounded arm: it was bleeding. The amount of tear gas they released into the air that day was impressive. I honestly don't know how we survived. People were unhappy with the situation, the city had just been destroyed, and what was the army doing? **That day, August 8, I realized how much influence politics and religion have on the army.***

"To give you an idea of the situation we are experiencing in the country, I'll just tell you that there are a lot of people making a salary of \$10 a month!"

*I'm very lucky to have a sister who lives in London and bought the plane ticket for me. I'm only in France because of her. **My money is frozen in Lebanese banks. I don't have access to my money.** I have it, but it's like I don't have it. When I checked the prices of tickets to France, a one-way ticket cost 15 million Lebanese pounds!*

*I currently have a certain amount of dollars in my Lebanese bank account, but I don't have access to the damn money. **And the thing that bothers me the most is that I don't have the option to do anything about it.** Let me explain I can take my money out of the Lebanese account in Lebanese lira, not in dollars, but in doing so, I lose so much of it because the exchange rate, instead of being at 1250, is at 3900. Pharmacies, hospitals, gas stations, supermarkets, schools, and all other places that should allocate basic necessities, **operate at a black-market exchange rate: 20,000 miserable Lebanese pounds for a single dollar!***

"I didn't want it to end this way: I didn't want to leave my country."

*Even though I have a French passport and can go anywhere I want at any time, I never wanted to leave Lebanon. And now here I am. **When we started taking to the streets and protesting, I seriously thought that we are the change the country needs, but instead...** I even lost a tooth during the clashes with the police, I was beaten, but nothing. When the dollar was well over **20,000 Lebanese lira**, the current exchange rate, I bought furniture for my house. They literally cost me an arm and a leg, and **now, after the explosion, I have nothing.** I paid for electricity regularly, but the electricity worked intermittently, and that was on lucky days, on others I was left in the dark.*

***The only way I could help my parents and help myself was to leave.** And that's what I did. In the last three months, three of my friends have committed suicide. That's enough now or I'll start crying. **My resilience has a limit. And this limit is called Lebanon.**"*



Roberta Vaduva

A new government for Lebanon and an urgent reform. Where is Lebanon going? *A chat with Talal Khrais (National News Agency)*

by Lorenzo Somigli - September, 9, 2021



It was an extremely fruitful meeting with **Talal Khrais**, correspondent for the *National News Agency*, at the headquarters of the **Foreign Press Association** in Rome. We came into contact with Talal thanks to the interest of **Assadakah** (through the colleague Roberto Roggero), due our report on Lebanon and precisely for our chronicle of the August 4 protests in Beirut.

"Lebanon is preparing to have a new government" he explains. *"Behind the threat from the whole West to declare Lebanon a bankruptcy and after an intervention by France on the Shiite side and aimed at favoring negotiations, a turning point is expected. Who could be the premier? Mikati is an extremely eligible candidate"*.

Getting out of the **stalemate** will not be easy also because a **profound reform** of the institutions is essential. *"There are three essential points: the abolition of sectarianism, a single national constituency compared to the many that now exist, a finally complete separation of powers"*.

An essential point is the end of confessionalism and a gradual transition to secularism. *"Ours is a unique country. We are a peace laboratory between different ethnic groups and religions. We have ten patriarchs. In Lebanon, the only Arab country in the Middle East, Christians are free but equally there are Druze, Shi'a and Sunnis. Nonetheless, we must be able to recognize that, with respect to the premises, something has jammed in the process of building Lebanon"*.

And also: *"We should have two chambers, one that reflects the interests of local communities, another, a Senate, which knows how to express the most consolidated interests. These transformations could certainly help guide the transition towards a secular state"*.

We also mention the **role of Italy** in Lebanon which, as Talal says, *"every time Italy intervenes, does it intelligently. In Afghanistan, to stay with recent events, the Italian contingent is perhaps the only one that has developed something concrete for the locals. So it was in Lebanon with UNIFIL, which has implemented important projects that have made us appreciate Italy"*.

Lorenzo Somigli

**From the Roman legions to federal Lebanon,
an essay into the roots of devolution** (thanks to Iad Boustany)

by Roberta Vaduva - September 14, 2021

To understand federalism, one needs to comprehend the underlying concepts, and even more so, the extent to which these concepts espouse the social reality of Lebanon. Subsidiarity, self-rule, secularism, localism are the foundational pillars of that governance model.

Subsidiarity

An obscure concept developed by and for the Roman legions transformed the world and might, eventually, save Lebanon. At a time Cato the Elder was relentlessly repeating "Delenda Cartago Est" and Quintus Flaminius was directing his armies at the Battle of Cynoscephalae, Rome was fighting on two fronts facing two mighty Mediterranean powers: the Macedonians and the Phoenicians. Flexibility, thought the Roman commanders, would be instrumental in defeating highly centralized commanded and controlled armies. Subsidiarity, they thought, the concept whereby any centurion was empowered to take all reasonable decisions including the calling upon the support units, could turn defeat into victory. And indeed it did. The Centurion was empowered to scale his forces. Scale-up would say Nassim Taleb in a modern governance lingo. In the later Romanized Cartago, St Augustine carried such concept into the social and political space, and onto St Thomas Aquino until subsidiarity reached the reformation mindset and was forcefully advocated for by Johannes Althusius around 1614 in "Politica", in defense of federalism. Subsidiarity had become the principle that decisions should always be taken at the lowest possible level or closest to the impacted parties. But its time had not come yet. Subsidiarity needed a companion concept -Res Publica, Republic- before it could fulfill its potential as a governance system.

Cuius Regio Eius Religio (self-rule)

With Calvin's reformation clashing with Catholicism, Res Publica Christiana was ravaged in the ugliest form of civil war the solution to which required questioning the very foundations of social organization. The political philosophy in Christendom needed to be reinvented. A reflection into the ethology of peace and foundations of governance. In the midst of the "German civil war", with divisions running too deep and conflicts stretching too wide, shallow fixes were no longer an option. Diversity in religious dogma was the new reality drawing a new scattered map of the Holy Roman Germanic Empire and beyond. Only a forceful concept, evenly and fairly applied to all dominions, would restore some resemblance of peace. That attempt to find a global peace based on sound philosophical grounds was attempted Augsburg in 1555. A novel concept of political philosophy was introduced: Cuius Regio Eius Religio; whose realm, their religion. For peace to take hold, governed and governors has to be of the same faith.

Secularism

Secularism was best theorized by St Augustine in the City of God (426 AD) in which he summons the emperor with all matters that "changed with time" secularum, secular matters. Church and all spiritual matters, "all matters that do not alter with the passage of time" would remain entrusted to clerics to manage. St Thomas and the neo-thomists political philosophers upheld such a distinction between the realm of the church and that of the emperor. They further developed the concept into a political reality: the Res Publica Christiana. As the clerics were mandate to manage church and souls, the laics (non-cleric Christians) were to govern the secular matters. Secularity and laicity, Christian concepts as they are, had emerged from Christian dogma itself and not against it. Synthesis

Rerum Novarum, Pope Leo XIII Encyclical of 1891, defined the Catholic Church views in the face of the "new matters": progress, development, capitalism, communism, poverty and wealth, nations and social constructs. Indeed these were new matters. And yet the Pope used old tools to address them. The organic nation, a geography constructed bottom up and scaled to optimality had proved itself to be an adequate framework for humans to best fulfill their potential in an environment of shared values. Subsidiarity, as Leon XIII prophesized was the key concept on which to build the social development in a political environment delineated by the 1555 Augsburg peace principle. From these two concepts emerged the peace and stability framework that was foundational for ending the European civil wars and the European social wars, and paved the way for development, expansion of religious freedom, social stability, tolerance and secularism.

Resonating Concepts in Mount Lebanon

Christianity carried all these concepts to the Levantine shores...and mountains. Cuius regio Eius religio was indeed a well-recognized political concept as the Chehab emirs felt the urge to convert to Maronitism to govern the Christian populated areas of Mount Lebanon. Subsidiarity, localism and self-rule, were also well-entrenched realities since the Phoenicians, a common trait further reinforced by mountainous insularity. These concepts were best expressed in the city-state model, later further encapsulated in the «casa» (district) mindset delineated since the crusades, easily accommodating with the loosely centralized «Maan» dynasty governing rules. At the peak of the centralized feudal system, with the exacerbation of the Chehab Emirs grip over power and its centralizing tendencies, that same localist and insular mindset found itself on a collision course with -and in the fierce rejection of- the pitiless grip of Prince Bachir Chehab II the Great. Revolt unused ending in the toppling of the monarchy (1842) and the entire feudal system (1861). Localism, self-rule culture and subsidiarity was best exemplified in the republic of Zahle (1843) and Kesrowan (1859) emerging a few months only after the feudal system was brought to an end. With Bachir III converting to Islam, the Cuius Regio Eius Religio bond was broken and the overwhelmingly Christian kingdom felt no longer obligated towards an authority whose vanished legitimacy ceased to command obedience.



The XIXth century, saw the overthrowing of the feudal system (as elsewhere in Europe) and the first experiments into democratic republican models. Levant's social fabric was unanimously viewed as multi-national. The Levantines viewed themselves as distinct nations. The Ottomans, the empire which dominated the Levant, had legally classified its subject per "Millet" a Turkish word which meant

"nations". Finally the European kingdoms objectively perceived the various Levantine populations as nations. From King Louis IX to Louis XIV to the Napoleons all addressed the various nations as such: be it Shiaa, Druze or Maronites. Metternich himself ultimately titled the constitution he himself drafted between 1861 and 1864 "Reglement Organic" i.e. the settlement by organic nationalities. Mount Lebanon was recognized

as a country to various nations. The model based on subsidiarity and self-rule was so successful that modern Turkish historian Engin Akarlı remained puzzled by its success. So much so as to label that era (and his book covering it) "the long peace". Akarlı went as far to argue that, had the Sublime Porte extended the application of these governance principles to the other dominions of the empire, it would not have collapsed.

1926, The year the patriots became sectarians

This social reality was denied recognition in 1926. Indeed the new Constitution of "Greater Lebanon" departed from that of 1864. The latter (the *Règlement Organique* of 1864) was "federal" decentralized bottom up, cognizant of multi-nationalities. The former (ie the 1926 constitution) unitarian, administrative, centralized and inspired from the French Jacobin model. "Millet" no longer meant "nation", it was translated into "sect" and confined into the religious space. It was no longer "identity", it had become "faith". The labels might have changed but the reality did not. Populations were then as they are today: different nations in one country.

The 1864 constitution had allowed each identity to freely express itself, to trace its roots back into the depth of history and to design the way to project itself into the future. The national narrative (roman national) being the way people view their own past, construct their present and dream their future, was as it should be, a coherent world-view cementing people around shared values. Simple examples go a long way in explaining the difference between reading of historical facts and a national narrative.

Take Waterloo, as a historical fact, for instance. Historical facts are indeed known to all and challenged by none. But is it a victory or a defeat? The answer is dependent on the view point, the national narrative. In the UK and in Germany, Waterloo is a victory, but in France, it is a defeat. Apply the same to Yarmouk, the Crusades, Fakhereddine,....

Historical facts are the same but their reading differs. Saints and demons, friends and foes, allies and traitors, are defined depending on the national narra-



tive. The national narrative is the way historical facts are sown together to give sense to history and meaning to life. "On Identity and meaning" wrote the anthropologist Selim Abou. In Lebanon, sect is identity not (only) faith. Our histories (that of all Lebanese) espouses that of our religious communities. Those agnostic or atheists, would remain agnostic or atheist Christians, Druze, Sunni or Shiaa. Furthermore, our diverse national narratives frame the minds in a way to shape our diverging views of the worlds.

Who's a friend? Who's a foe? Who's the martyr and who's the traitor? Where are we coming from and where are we heading? Which is vice and which is virtue? Which is licit and which is illicit?

All such matters are dealt-with differently depending on the national narrative one belongs to. Depending If you are Christian, Sunni, Shiaa or Druze and irrespective whether you are a believer or not. As a result, one can easily see how ludicrous are the claims to remove "sectarianism". In reality, these are merely concealed attempts to disarticulate identity, the ineluctable results of which is the destruction of the community and its disappearance.



By turning "Millet" (nation) into "sect" the 1926 constitution attempted to erase the organic nations and their related identities in favor of a new national idea called Lebanon. The intellectual elite of the time was tasked to come up with a new unifying narrative. Asad Rustom, Jawad Boulos and Fouad Ephraim Boustany took-on the challenge. They pro-

posed a consensual book in 1936. Schools kids learned about the Phoenicians, as well as the various Emirs dynasties unifying the Levant under the Ottoman rule from the XVI c. But little, if anything, was taught about those 15 centuries than stretched between this and that. Between the coming of Christ and that of Qurqumaz Al Maani. The identities and the organic nations had to be suppressed. And yet this consensual unifying book was not agréable to Sunni. They rejected the labelling of Phoenicians as our ancestors. Viewing themselves as Arabs, the Sunni labelled these «previous civilisations occupying the Levantine shores». The finest exemple of how national narratives shape identities.

Social realities

100 years later, It is no secret to claim that Lebanon is a failed state and that all its people have equally suffered therefrom. A new model is about to emerge and this is the last chance to build it on solid principles. This new model is required to reduce tensions not increase it, heighten collaboration not hinder it, to foster peace and favor prosperity to all. This model has to be based on the two cornerstone principles explained above: subsidiarity and cuius regio eius religio. We don't have to look afar for such a model, it was well established here in Mount Lebanon between 1864 and 1915 and departing therefrom in 1926 triggered our woes and slow decay. It is our last chance for a viable social contract which fosters freedom, coexistence, development, solidarity, peace and prosperity. Such construct has a name: Federalism.

It is time for a bottom-up construction. It is time to ask the people (the various nations/communities) each what they want. It is time to revert to the smallest entity (the municipality) and empower them to speak as to what they want. They have been laboring the same fields for over 6,000 years. Don't we owe them the right to decide of their own future, of their own fate. Vox populi vox Dei it is said. So be it.

I had tweeted this on June 22, 2021: "Lebanon Christians will soon be no more. Their civilization will slowly end. Not in a highly publicized massacre, not in a heroic last stand. History will not remember a fatal date nor glorious name: no May 29 1453, no Constantin Palaeologus.... and yet the lights of Hagia Sophia will go out. Slowly drained exhausted by time and demography and wrapped in the shame of a corrupt system, like watching a train wreck on slow motion, our civilization will soon exit history."

Without federalism, this tweet will soon become prophecy.

Roberta Vaduva

Decentralization: the missed reform.

A chat with Elie Elias by Lorenzo Somigli - September 18, 2021

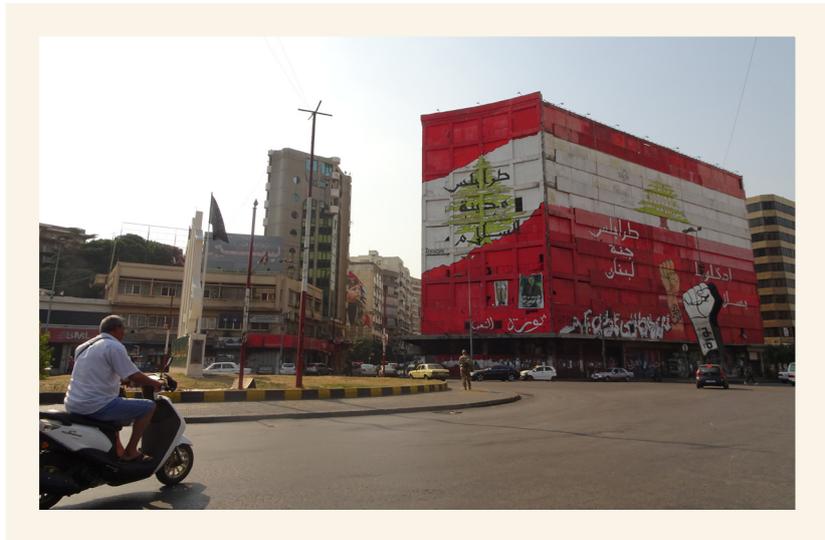
After the dramatic civil war, Lebanon launched a **process of decentralization** but the results, as the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies often points out, were modest. We talked about it with **Elie Elias**, PhD-Senior University lecturer in History of Lebanon.

Why do you think the confederation is better than the federation?

"Based on the experience that the lebanese political system faced in the last 100 years, any form of decentralization is welcomed. As for the preference between Federation and confederation, the first can hold more grounds to consolidate the Historical National Pact between Muslims and Christians".

The devolution of power to local communities is way to avoid the dissolution for fragile state. In Belgium it worked, in England a little less. Could it work in Lebanon? Why?

"Local governance and moving the powers from the central government can stop using religion as a ticket to receive the minimum services from the government or in elections. For a successful decentralization system in Lebanon need to be accompanied by a legislative institutions that deals with the regional affairs and another one for the country as a whole".



Identity and religion have a very close correlation. Will people accept the decline of the religious element or will they have a "rejective crisis"?

"I do agree that Religion and Identify are correlated especially in a region like the Middle East and that is the reason of historical evolution for 14 centuries. Decentralization systems in our case consolidates the sence of belonging of every religious groups in its historical region. Lebanon's diversity is also regional".

Can the new government be sensitive to decentralization?

“The decentralization is a reform step mentioned in the Taef Agreement to stop the war and start the reconciliation post war period. Unfortunately every single government that was formed in the last 30 years was a Pro-Syrian and Pro-Iranian which for those two countries a stable Lebanon is not an option. This is why the new government will not initiate any reform of that kind...”.

by Lorenzo Somigli

À propos du Liban et de l’Afghanistan

Un dialogue avec Salvatore Lombardo by Lorenzo Somigli



Le premier entretien avec lui fut passionnant. Ce fut comme être à l’Hôtel Alexandre quand il rencontra un personnage vu seulement sur de rares images imprécises : **Bin Laden**, avec sa mallette pleine à craquer de dollars et ses gardes du corps musclés. Cela donnait bien l’image d’une **Beyrouth** grande blanchisseuse d’argent et carrefour d’espions et d’intérêts mondiaux. Comme elle l’a été et l’est encore. Le professeur **Salvatore Lombardo** est un observateur raffiné, cultivé et pertinent, qui connaît en profondeur la complexité des lieux dont il parle. Que ce soit l’Afghanistan ou le Liban. Nous devons vivement remercier M^e **Roger Eddé** qui nous a mis en contact et pour lequel Lombard ne tarit pas d’éloges : *«Il avait fondé un parti semblable à celui de Mandela en Afrique du Sud. Une expérience fort intéressante».*

«Par rapport à il y a quelques jours, il y a eu des changements positifs. **Massoud a lancé une contre-offensive** sur plusieurs positions avec de bons résultats » explique Lombardo qui s'entretient régulièrement avec **Massoud**. « Dans le même temps, **les Talibans ont commis beaucoup d'erreurs**, qui leur enlève le soutien de la population : ils ont tué, ils ont restreint les libertés, surtout aux femmes, ils ont contraint beaucoup de monde à fuir. Si sur le plan militaire on enregistre quelques succès, il existe le problème des réfugiés dont Massoud essaie de s'occuper comme il le peut mais ce n'est pas facile ». En outre, Lombardo a inauguré depuis peu un master de relations internationales à l'**UMEF de Genève** en partant justement du cas afghan.

Massoud, bien qu'il oppose une résistance certaine au régime, ne peut encore compter sur le soutien de la **communauté internationale**. « Il arrive des munitions, un peu de carburant. Inde, Tadjikistan et Ouzbékistan apportent quelquefois leur aide. Il n'y a rien de significatif mais nous y travaillons ».

«Voyons si nous parvenons à le faire venir à Paris ou à Strasbourg. Je suis plus optimiste qu'avant ».

«Il y a peu à attendre, en revanche, de Biden. Il ne dirige plus rien, c'est évident désormais. Il est l'otage de l'extrême gauche et de Harris. **Il ne fait que semer le chaos**. Pourquoi envoie-t-il toutes ces troupes dans les pays baltes ? Pour agacer la Russie ? Que dirait-il si Poutine l'envoyait au Canada ou au Mexique ? **Ce sont des actions dangereuses pour tout le monde**. Sans parler de la dernière offense, dernière d'une longue série, à la France avec la question des **sous-marins**. Macron a très bien fait de retirer son ambassadeur».

À propos de **Macron** - après un coup d'accélération initial avec le Pass sanitaire, il a été contraint de faire ostensiblement marche arrière - les élections approchent, Lombardo en est certain: «Il est déjà pratiquement réélu. La gauche est un désastre total. **Marine Le Pen** intercepte les demandes d'une grande partie de la France mais elle n'est pas présentable, elle n'a pas le niveau de Macron et risque d'être à nouveau battue. Face aux deux points douloureux pour le pays, **la santé et la sécurité** - n'oublions pas que la France a accueilli quelque deux millions de réfugiés en peu d'années - le Président a dû revoir sa position et se concentrer sur un agenda plus proche des intérêts réels des Français. Bref, **la politique de Le Pen mais offrant un visage présentable**».

Après cette intéressante vue panoramique, venons-en au **Liban**, un pays que Lombardo connaît de façon approfondie. Il y a été envoyé en **1989**, il a écrit un livre "**Liban Libre**" (1996, Transbordeurs) qui a vendu des dizaines de milliers de copies, et lui a même coûté un éloignement du pays, suivi de "**Retours à Beyrouth**" (2006, Transbordeurs). «Je m'occupe du Liban depuis des décennies, depuis 89. Mon livre

“Liban Libre” est interdit et on m’a interdit pendant au moins dix ans de mettre les pieds au Liban. Mais, quand le Général Aoun est revenu, j’étais avec lui...»

Vous connaissez bien le **Président Aoun** ? *«J’étais dans l’avion avec lui, j’étais le seul invité. Quand il était en France, il est venu à une présentation de mon livre sur Massoud, qu’il admirait beaucoup. Au Liban, j’ai connu tous les chefs, même Nasrallah».*

«Les portes de sorties pour le Liban ? Elles sont au nombre de deux » affirme-t-il et il expose une première solution, à vrai dire inhabituelle (pour nous). **«Un coup d’état militaire d’Aoun.** L’armée, qui jouit de la plus grande estime auprès de la société, est avec lui, le Hezbollah est avec lui, et l’on parle d’un acteur de premier plan. Aoun pourrait prendre le pouvoir **pour une période limitée** – un, maximum deux ans – avec des **ministres militaires**: plus de fiefs religieux, plus d’escroqueries, des interventions rapides et courageuses. Il aurait pu le faire effectivement il y a dix ans, quand il était à l’apogée de sa gloire, après l’exil en France et ce **retour triomphal à Beyrouth.** Aujourd’hui, il est plus fatigué, plus vieux, moins légitimé par rapport à avant. Il a misé sur la prise du pouvoir dans la légalité, parce qu’il croit en les Institutions».

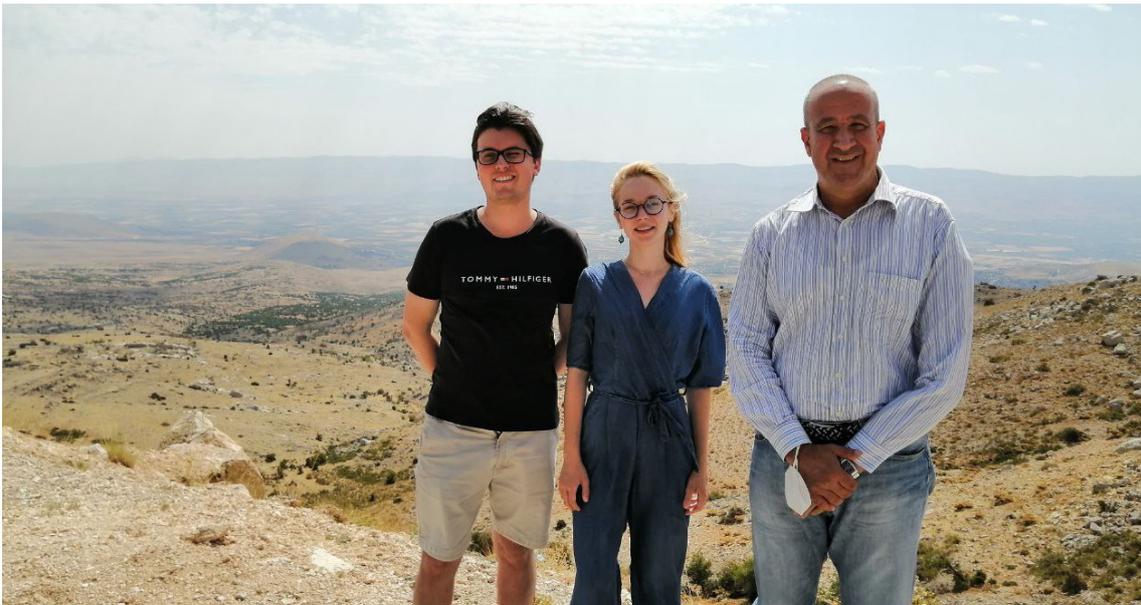
Au-delà de la manière extrême du **dictateur**, il y a une voie réformiste: *«C’est celle que **Massoud** a en tête pour l’Afghanistan : le **fédéralisme.** Des pays qui ont une **composition ethnique et religieuse non conforme** et qui donc ont les mêmes problèmes peuvent viser à la même solution : se rapprocher de l’exemple avec des zones d’influence. Évidemment – précise-t-il avec finesse – on doit tenir compte du fait que, au sein des Chrétiens et des Musulmans, il y a **plusieurs “sectes” avec plusieurs orientations politiques.** Pour en revenir à la réflexion sur Aoun, près de 60% des **Chiites** sont avec le Hezbollah, donc avec Aoun, mais un pourcentage à ne pas sous-estimer de 40% ne l’est pas. Les **Sunnites** ne sont pas tous du côté de la famille Hariri qui entretient des rapports avec le Président. Les **Chrétiens** prennent parti à 90% pour Aoun mais il y a quand même une minorité. Je tiens à le préciser parce que nous parlons qu’une mosaïque fortement composite. Aoun – ajoute-t-il encore – est accepté par les autres acteurs régionaux : par les Arabes pour son charisme, par la **Syrie** qui veut une paix durable, même par **Israël** qui se rend compte du problème que représente un Liban en crise et de la présence même des Palestiniens au Liban».*

Revenons à la **France**, le pays qui a eu le plus de répercussions sur le Liban moderne. *«Macron, pendant sa visite, a menacé la classe politique mais c’était une menace légère, inconsistante. Elle n’a pas le même poids qu’une menace faite par Aoun... La France ne peut insister uniquement sur le changement qui, de toute manière, n’a pas d’effet sur la classe politique actuelle. Elle doit faire quelque chose de concret. Elle doit garantir, avec le **Fonds Mondial**, le déblocage de fonds pour assainir la dette publique et rendre de nouveau le Liban appétissant. Quand les finances publiques*

*seront assainies, il faudra réformer le système au sens fédéral. Chaque zone aurait alors le maximum de responsabilité sur des sujets comme **l'école, l'énergie et la sécurité**, qui sont déterminants pour la population. Le Liban est petit mais c'est un grand pays. Il faut changer sans culpabiliser... les politiciens actuels : ce sont des voleurs, pas de nazis!»*

Lorenzo Somigli

“Lebanese impasse: a way out” by Maroun El Moujabber



“It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness”.

Confucius

I find myself wrestling daily with the overbearing burden of the same **existential crisis** that my fellow Lebanese compatriots and expats are haunted by, but I am not here to speak of the causes of our collective despondency, nor am I writing this to cast accusations or hypothesize about who should be held liable for the challenges that we are currently forced to face. To do so would only lead to more stale discussions that will never hold any practical value.

No, the reason for which I am writing this, is to propose what I deem to be the best way to deal with our catastrophic and woeful *status quo*, and **to suggest solutions that each**

and every one of us can contribute to and partake in, to bring about the much-awaited change that we are all yearning for.

But first, it is important recognize the following:

- The solution requires years upon years of **consistent and relentless work**.
- A truly viable solution could only be orchestrated by those veritably will to make **a change from the inside**.
- Any solution proposed by an external party will most certainly cater to some of their needs at the expense of our best interest, and all those who wished to involve themselves in our affairs have historically proven that they value the assistance of the **corrupt** and the morally **bankrupt**. (They're easy to bribe and buy-out)
- Globalization has stripped many countries of their national sovereignty and their ability to make their own, fully-independent and uncoerced, economic and political decisions.

As such, it only stands to reason that we must sow the seeds of positive and constructive change from within, by proposing solutions tackling local and rural **development**. Why?

Nation-wide changes are next to impossible to implement, and it is highly unlikely that the elections will serve as a catalyst for the kind of "shake-up" that everyone is anticipating. The **ruling mafia** has roots reaching quite far into every level of the Lebanese society, acting as a deep state impervious to all forms resistance and capable of deterring all accusations and facts with methodical counter-propaganda campaigns, ultimately asserting itself as an-ever present tyrant denying citizens their most basic of rights and depriving them of their sense of dignity and self-worth.

Thus, we must steadily and arduously commit ourselves to making **small societal improvements** to pave the way for mid and long-term political changes.

To get rid of the tyranny of this ruling mafia, we have to ensure that each and every one of us does all that is within their ability to raise the awareness of Lebanese youth regarding their rights, and to more importantly revitalize their commitment to their national duty of succeeding and excelling in their studies and careers.

To get rid of the tyranny of this ruling mafia, we must make changes occur in the **upcoming municipal elections** to exert further non-politicized influence over municipal councils and to ensure that their selected members are truly committed to promoting **tangible local development** and to bringing about palpable social, economic and cultural improvements.

To get rid of the tyranny of this ruling mafia, **we must promote agriculture, food manufacturing and sustainable ecological tourism**, and as an expert on this subject, I could

adamantly state that all what the previous governments had done was predominantly geared towards undermining rural areas and values, and affecting said areas' agricultural capacities to force people to migrate towards cities. Make no mistake about it, their policies were mostly centered around what our Tunisian brethren would refer to as "Deriding those of Faith".

"To get rid of the tyranny of this ruling mafia we have to seek renewable sources of energy and optimize the utilization of water and natural resources".

To get rid of the tyranny of this ruling mafia, **we have to preserve our environment and reduce wastewater and solid waste pollution.**

To get rid of the tyranny of this ruling mafia, **we have to encourage our youth to return to their villages** to perform their creative and pioneering works in the fields of art, information technology and culture, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the true value of such forms of work.

To get rid of the tyranny of this ruling mafia, we have to devise an advanced and sustainable **structure of governance** to democratically establish policies promoting education, culture, art, technology and scientific research, etc.

We have a difficult and long road ahead of us, but I have personally never stopped, not even for a second, from attempting to get rid of the tyranny of this ruling mafia, and for this reason, I have decided to have Italian journalists Roberta Văduva and Lorenzo Somigli as guests, to **render the Italian public more aware about the deplorable conditions in which we are living**, and to invite them to assist us in **finding solutions and to cooperate** with us in order to bring some hope back to our beloved Lebanon. I'd like to end this with a reminder that prayer aids and empowers us, and as **mother Theresa** is infamously quoted to say:

"If you truly wished to change the world, return home and show your family the love they deserve".

This paper was originally written in Arabic. It was translated and edited by SIYAK

Maroun El Moujabber

Dialogue after our return from Lebanon.

Lorenzo Somigli [LS] and Roberta Vaduva [RV]



[LS] I had not realized a trait we have in common: the tension to travel, furrowed by the restlessness for the fixity of everyday life. It is the need for discovery and the unknown, for challenge and wonder. It is the need to go to catch up with Kerouac. And where else but in the Mediterranean, where one can spend seven years in Oigia [1], as a prisoner of love, and three in Kastellorizo [2] among ouzo and sirtaki without knowing anything about September 8, only to return there as a dog because *"Italy has disappointed me"*.

[RV] Well, I can answer you with two lines borrowed always from Mediterraneo, readapted to the context, however: I don't want to *"stay on the island of oblivion"* just as I don't want to *"smoke a little oblivion"*. Italy is a peninsula, true, but whatever it is it must be more aware of what is happening not too far from its shores and take initiative as soon as possible because, as you said between one swim and another in the waters of Jbeil, the nature of the sea is to bring everything to shore. To which country the shore belongs, it matters little, the water knows no bounds and so do the problems!

[LS] You know me by now, and after Lebanon even better. I suspect everything when it comes to power. Nothing is real. Or to be less 'initiativ', nothing is as it seems. And we

even had the privilege of being there. We also had “fun” when the power went off, a fact to which we are now unaccustomed in our Western softness, except in very rare cases. Granted that reserves are scarce, granted, is it a political choice or is it a more sophisticated strategy, the desire to keep the “vile plebs” in a constant state of agitation.

[RV] It's a narrative that is only valid for us, in Italy, because the other countries, despite their many “shortcomings” - they, most likely, don't perceive them as such - are quietly enjoying life. And rightly so! The power may have gone off two or three times in the space of a week, for a few minutes, but the locals in the centre of Byblos certainly didn't have any problems with the electricity, on the contrary! Despite also the lines of cars, under the



scorching eastern sun, that we met at the petrol pumps, the Lebanese people showed great humanity. Not to mention the incident on the highway on the penultimate day: their concreteness is disarming.

[LS] I will begin by saying that I returned from Lebanon with new ideas for research. Many takes issue with religion that invades all spheres of life and would like to abolish confessionalism. Some reflections come to mind. Religion is the socio-political fracture in Lebanon, it is what informs the existence of the individual and gives rhythm to the life of the community. What other identity could there be in its absence? If someone really wants to give it up, are we sure that Hezbollah and the others political players would give it up too? What is certain is that religion, even with its infinite flaws, creates a sense of reality, which otherwise would be unbearable, gives dignity to humble conditions and projects them into a better otherness to be conquered. Just look at our deprivation at the death of God.

Certainly, old, and new problems open: “Si est Deum unde malum”[3]. Hence also the story of the biblical Job, modernized by Roth [4], which shows us the harshness of

understanding suffering. In an all too little-known book, T.S. Eliot gives a portentous reconstruction of the journey of faith.

“So, they came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time, a moment not out of time but in time, in what we call history: dissecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not as a moment of time, a moment in time but time was created through that moment: for without meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave meaning. Hence it seemed as if men should proceed from light to light, in the light of the Word, through Passion and Sacrifice saved in spite of their negative being; bestial as ever, carnal, selfish as ever, interested and dull as ever they were before, yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their march on the path illuminated by the light; often pausing, wasting time, wandering, lingering, returning, yet never following another path.”^[5] This is the way of man. God needs man, in the words of Don Giussani ^[6].



[RV] Yes, religion is very much felt in the country, it is an identity factor for them, the fruit of a troubled and tormented history - and the present is no less so! I was very struck by a phrase of Roula's in this regard "praying is all we have". I agree with her only in part, but their religiosity can be felt everywhere in the country, and it is not - or at least to-

day it no longer is - an exclusive religiosity, but an inclusive one. I'm reminded of the Arabic inscriptions in churches and of seeing people obviously of Muslim faith visiting the holy places of Christianity. Plus, at first glance, it is very difficult to understand the religious faith of a Lebanese, unless they wear distinctive signs such as crucifixes or the veil for women.

It must also be said that with young people the religious factor is waning they have grown up on milk and religion, but they are also the first to have understood that the religious divide is not beneficial to anyone, if not to politics to keep the population divided and continue to (not) govern. Divide and rule... The Lebanese know this well: they don't need someone to remind them of their faith. They are aware of it by themselves and always by themselves, perhaps unconsciously by now because they have internalized the concept well, they are well in their own community, it is their

modus vivendi. Community that dialogues with the others, they help each other, but they remain different and divided entities. All this in perfect harmony. Nobody talks about clashes and disagreements. When politics gets in the way, unfortunately, as happens all over the world, conflicts arise. Is it necessary to speak of fractures? I wouldn't know sincerely. If the religious factor disappears from the political scene, the national one should - the conditional is obligatory - take the upper hand and the new politics will have to be triggered by the north-south, coast-mountain divide. Politics must talk about the economy, not about Christians, Muslims, and Druze. But again, talking about religion will be necessary because there is a strong and intrinsic correlation between community, faith, and geography. Whether we like it or not, religious identity is a fundamental part of Lebanese society! The various political, social and military actors in the field must be willing to give up some of their benefits today for a national, prosperous, stable and sovereign Lebanon of tomorrow. Hezbollah as much as anyone else.

[LS] Of the protests of August 4, our media have highlighted practically only the episodes of violence, which there were, but they were largely minor. We saw the people, sorrowful but ordered, we saw civil society, the productive bodies. And then again: after such a tragedy - the third largest explosion after the atomic ones - the people went to the streets, how many of our people went to the streets after the Morandi Bridge?

[RV] The West, unfortunately, has flattened itself from all points of view. Indifference reigns supreme and the ability to judge has been annihilated by the mask, with a few exceptions. We no longer know how to protest, we are no longer used, comfortable on the couch to cheer for Italy at the World Cup or Eurovision, two victories that will soon pay dearly; for this reason, it is easier to point the finger and judge those who do. The fact of presenting the world around us in the grip of chaos is functional to the theatre we are witnessing, forced, it's a way of nipping in the bud any form of protest: they are doing worse, be content with what you have. We must shed this mantle of superiority that we have unjustly attributed to ourselves because, seeing and living some of the Mediterranean / Middle Eastern realities, I do not feel superior to them at all. On the contrary, I confess to feel jealousy, sometimes, seeing their spontaneity and their clear and quiet way of living. They are peoples who build a fortune from what little they have. They have an enormous potential.

The "East" has struggled to obtain its freedom from the West and now struggles, "mixing memory and desire" **[7]**, tenaciously not to be a prisoner of itself. Because its roots are not extinguished and no "spring rain" **[8]** - the rain of blood and instability of the Arab springs, which only made a big fuss and made the air unbreathable and life miserable - can move them, as they are strong and difficult to uproot, nourished by common sense, morality, tradition that they are not ashamed to preserve and flaunt, and

love. Love for themselves, for their neighbours whom they warmly welcome, for life as it is. Because they are tired of feeling rented out in their own home.

[LS] El Hob Gameel, love is a wonderful thing. Could it be because of the love in the air that struck us like this? Love begets many things ...

[RV] Even when people do not speak the same language or profess the same religion.

Lorenzo Somigli, Roberta Vaduva

Note

- [1] Odyssey, 5th Book;
- [2] The quote is from the film *Mediterraneo* (1991) by Gabriele Salvatores;
- [3] Quote by Boethius in *De consolazione philosophiae*;
- [4] J. Roth, "Job" (1930);
- [5] T.S. Eliot, "The Choirs of The Rock" (1934);
- [6] Don Giussani's speech at the Rimini Meeting of 1985;
- [7] Incipit of "The Wasteland" (1922) by T.S. Eliot;
- [8] *Ibid.*

El Hob Gameel

by Gianni Bonini



*"While at Beirut airport, in front of the sea, I'm waiting to embark for my return flight, and I'm passing the time by snooping on YouTube between Kavafis' hexameter on Beirut and some old Lebanese songs, I come across an old Egyptian film, which I had enthusiastically told my friend Mouin, secretary general of the Lebanese CNR, and which I had filed in my favourites but then lost. The film is "**Ghazal al- Banat**", "The loves / the flirtations of girls", the year is 1949 and Leila Moraud glows with the beauty with which Shaharazád conquered King Shahriyâr, when she sings and plays "**El Hob gameel**" one could translate it as "**Love is a wonderful thing**", the joy of living is the background to the plot between a poor Arab teacher and the daughter of a Pasha. The Arab melting harmoniously in the musical, which has nothing to envy, indeed, to Hollywood products, infects me and puts me in a good mood. And so, I think that this old Mediterranean has seen a lot, that the language of Laila, the film's protagonist, has given semantic life to the Greek and Roman worlds, to the Etruscans, to the same Nordic myths that have tried, with Indo-European and Aryan legends, to claim a primogeniture that has no foundation. I think I must stop reasoning on the short times of my personal experience and see things in a less conjunctural historical perspective. I convince myself and leave happier".*

This was the end of my **Beirut 2013** piece on one of the missions in Lebanon on behalf of **CIHEAM**, that time together with the **Italian CNR** and its brilliant and learned President **Luigi Nicolais**, and which appeared in issue 2 of *If*, the Florentine magazine that too soon went out of print because of the Florentines. There is nothing to add. So, thank you guys for making me relive with your trip the emotions, flavours and colours of a wonderful country that I miss and to which I will return.

Gianni Bonini

Il Tazebao

LA PRATICA DELL'OBIETTIVO