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Musings on a Visit to Beirut

By Abe J. Bassett

June 26, 1996

The Reconstruction of Lebanon

Beirut is in the midst of a gigantic building boom as apartment and commercial buildings spring up everywhere. The reconstruction is stimulated by the return of Lebanese displaced by the war, and by foreign investment. International corporations are returning and new construction projects are announced weekly. Plans have been announced this year for the rebuilding of Beirut's three large grand prewar hotels, Holiday Inn, St. George, Phoenician, all *totally* devastated during the war. The *Casino du Liban*, once the grandest gambling palace in the Mideast, has also announced a \$32 million dollar refurbishment plan. I toured a recently opened \$40,000,000 luxury hotel complex in Junieh, complete with three restaurants and a high-tech nightclub-disco interestingly named Earthquake. The rate of repairing and replacing war-damaged buildings is accelerating. Most physical reminders of the war soon will be gone.

Solidere, the privately financed company undertaking the multibillion dollar reconstruction of the city's central financial district is on schedule. One of the prime movers of Solidere is Prime Minister Rajik al-Hariri, himself a billionaire, and friend to many influential people through Europe and the Middle East. A public subscription to Solidere sold out within a short time of its offering. American businesses are being hurt as European and Asian companies invest in an economy that will soon rival its prewar status. Interestingly, during construction in the Central Business District, archeological ruins have been unearthed. These include some Roman and Byzantine mosaics, vestiges of Phoenician settlements, a Roman temple, and some medieval walls. Archeologists believe their excavation, which have slowed the reconstruction, will continue to yield significant results.

In Lebanon, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the standard building construction method is poured concrete over reinforcing rods. This expensive construction technology is made possible by the low labor costs and necessary by the scarcity of wood. Building exteriors and interior floors are finished with locally quarried marble or tile. Consequently, homes and buildings are relatively maintenance free, and complaints of noise from the floors above or below are negligible. In some Lebanese homes, the annual spring house cleaning consists of hosing down the walls and floors, after, of course, furniture and carpets have been removed.

Infrastructure

The Lebanese infrastructure, so seriously weakened during the long Civil War, is being rebuilt. The World Bank has been helpful in sponsoring projects to deal with electrical generation and transmission, waste water treatment, water distribution, and transportation. Still, roads are in poor condition, telephone service is unreliable, and pollution problems are serious. The state-operated telephone system is notoriously inefficient. Telephone land lines run helter-skelter along buildings and streets. IN the past several years, cellular telephones have become commonplace because, not requiring land lines, they are more reliable. Even University students carry cell phones, as do most of the patrons at chic Beirut cafes. The city of Beirut is overgrown and growing, but progress on the infrastructure is being made.

Traffic and Transportation

Traffic is unbelievably heavy: one estimate places the number of cars in Beirut at one and one-half million, about one car for every two people. Even the "dual carriageway" arterial highways are jammed in off-peak hours, and the smaller cities streets are difficult to negotiate. There are few working traffic lights, and few highways boast painted stripes. There are several major road projects underway, but traffic flow will be a problem for years to come. Drivers are very aggressive and think nothing pushing their cars into oncoming traffic, relying on the others to make accommodations. Drivers dart in and out of traffic and travel at speeds well beyond what reason would dictate. The Beirut-Jounieh highway is marred by frequent traffic accidents and resulting deaths. A two-lane highway carries four to five lanes of traffic. The traffic policemen are stationed at intersections but do not patrol the streets, and apparently do not enforce traffic laws. Whenever it was available, I wore a seat belt, probably the only person in Lebanon to do so.

Bus transportation has been reestablished, and the government recently signed a multimillion dollar contract to purchase an additional 400 buses. Taxis ' are a means of transportation for those without cars, but traveling long distances can be expensive relative to the cost of a taxi in Syria.

Business

Is Lebanon up to date? Item: there are more cellular telephones per capita in Lebanon than in the United States. Even students on the campuses walk with their cell phones in hand. Item: there are more Mercedes sedans per capita in Lebanon than in the United States. Item: there are more Mercedes sedans per capita in Lebanon than in Germany! Item: anything sold in America or Europe is available in short order in Lebanon, including videos, software, and designer dresses. You can purchase a copy of any software program for \$20. Item: University students openly purchase photocopied text books for their classes. Item: Want a cassette tape of your favorite songs? Stores will record them for you in your order, and no worry about the copyright laws.

Generally, business in Lebanon is pure free enterprise. Entrepreneurship abounds. Young people wish to work only for themselves. Lebanese complain of the impossible government bureaucracy, and the necessity to pay "fees" to secure government services. An important word is "wastah" (connections, influence) as in "you gotta have wastah" if you want a building permit, drivers license, or entry to a school. Of course, money buys wastah.

Gasoline is expensive but cigarettes cost only forty cents a pack. Johnny Walker Red is \$8.00. The government has no efficient way to collect taxes. A typical wage for a manual laborer is \$200 per month. The construction industry is manned mainly by Syrians as Lebanese eschew manual labor. Many well-to-do Lebanese families have maids from Sri Lanka or the Phillippines.

The Political Situation

Unease between Christians and Muslims persists, but the Lebanese seem intent on making their peace last. They see economic advantages in peace, and while they bemoan Syria's strong influence in Lebanese affairs, welcome the stability that Syria brings. Neither the Syrians nor Lebanese have a consulate or embassy in the other country, which, I think, is an indication of Syria's desire to reunite the two countries. There are 40,000 Syria soldiers stationed in Lebanon. Many of the soldiers are seen in civilian clothes selling various goods.

Al-Hariri, who is Moslem, is enthusiastically embraced by the Christians I met. (Under Lebanon's constitution, the Prime Minister is always a Sunni Moslem, while the President is a Maronite Christian, and the Speaker of the House, a Shi'a Moslem.) Hariri is a personal friend of French President Jacques Chirac. He is widely seen as the only man who is capable moving Lebanon's reconstruction.

Lebanese Attitudes

The power plant in Beirut that was hit during the Israeli-Hezbollah skirmish in April was out of action for only two weeks as France came to the rescue. The French, I was told during my May visit, are seen as Lebanon's protector and benefactor. All factions--Shia and Sunni Moslems, Maronite Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Armenian Orthodox, Druze--united behind Hezbollah, who was seen as their David in the fight against the Goliath. From the perspective of the people I talked to, Hezbollah was the winner, and America the loser in the April skirmish. Thus, the Arab-American love-hate relationship continues. The political goal all Lebanese agree upon: they wish all foreign influences to leave their country, including the Syrians, the Israelis, and the Iranians. The recent civil war has been labeled *The War of the Others*, not a *Civil War*.

Relative to Syria and Jordan, few women wear head scarfs, and veiled women are rare. Short skirts are everywhere, and by Syrian standards, the billboard advertising is shocking: bare torsos embrace in perfume advertisements; pretty models pose in bikini lingerie. These ads are short lived in the Moslem quarters, as they are obliterated or removed.

Language

In some sophisticated business districts there are no signs with Arabic writing. Because of the French Mandate from 1920 to 1946, many Lebanese speak French, having attended French speaking schools. In recent years, English has become a more important language. Advertising reflects this trend. English is the chief but not exclusive language used at The American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University. Many well-to-do families enroll their children in English language primary and secondary schools. Older educated Lebanese are fluent in Arabic and English or French, and some in all three languages. Satellite television brings CNN, CNBC and other English language programs into Lebanese homes.

Downtown Beirut

I spent a day walking the streets of West Beirut, the area of the most intensive fighting and destruction. Beirut has a very European feel to it. Erase the still visible bullet holes in many buildings, tidy up the telephone lines, change the signs to another language, and you might well be walking in a European city. Shops are bigger and better stocked than what one saw in Damascus and Aleppo. I walked the beautiful campus of American University of Beirut and later in the week the campus of Lebanese American University.

A second day, I walked Bourj Hammound (Dowra), the Armenian section of the city. The Armenians, who are great merchants, were armed during the war, but managed to survive without fighting or taking sides or suffering significant casualties.

Historic Lebanon

I visited Byblos, a Phoenician and Roman port city just north of Beirut, and like other ruins I visited in Jordan and Syria, it has its own unique story. A full tour of Lebanon would take about four or five days. My friends drove me to a ski resort, about 7000 feet above sea level and not more than 22 miles from the coast. One may ski in the morning and swim in the Mediterranean in the afternoon. Baalbek ("Baal" for the Roman God, and "bek" for the Bekaa Valley) is one of the most impressive of Roman ruins, nestled between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains, at the upper reaches of the fertile Bekaa valley. At about 3000 feet above sea level. Baalbek is a beauty not to be missed. Nearby are the fascinating ruins of Aanjar, which date from the Umayyads period.

Fortress America

The American Embassy has been relocated to a more secure site in Antelias (eastern Beirut). Our government purchased an entire hill and turned it into a fortress reminiscent of one of the citadels we visited in Syria. The new embassy is surrounded by a series of stone walls and fences. Razor-wire topped fences, armed guard towers, and electronic surveillance make stealthy penetration impossible. Patrols prowl streets up to a mile away, and at night the entire hill is brightly illuminated. It is unfortunate that the United States government continues its Travel Advisory against travel in Lebanon. It seems to me that the American Embassy in Beirut is the perfect symbol for the fortress mentality of the Department of State.

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