PROSPECTS FOR LEBANON

BESIEGED AND SILENCED: THE MUTED ANGUISH OF THE LEBANESE PEOPLE

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Bearing witness to Lebanon's harrowing events this past spring has been a gripping and instructive experience. In most other troubled spots of the world, often in the least likely places, the springtime of nations, so to speak, has ushered in some blissful signs of change. I followed with envy opposition fêtes in Budapest, triumphal masses in Gdansk, solidarity election meetings in the coal mines of Silesia, heroic episodes of the Palestinian Intifadah on the West Bank, manifestations of protest in Estonia and other Baltic republics . . . and the tragic outcome of the uprising in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Of course the most dramatic, an image which will doubtless be etched in our collective memory for a long time, is the picture of that lone and unarmed Chinese citizen, halting a lumbering column of tanks. These and other images of defiance, the voices of resistance, wrath and determination, shook and reawakened the conscience of the world to lingering injustices and crushing brutalities.

As a displaced Lebanese, the silence and impotence of my own entrapped and mired compatriots became more appalling. For considerably much less, at least if measured by the magnitude and duration

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of violence, all those other victims of collective suffering found outlets to express and mobilize their outrage.

As I watched the unfolding of such events—both the regenerative unleashing of rage in collective efforts to expunge sources of repression and evil elsewhere in the world, juxtaposed against the languishing and morbid preoccupation of the Lebanese with grief, fear and death—I could not help but dwell on the possible sources and consequences underlying such diametrical reactions.

Have the Lebanese become war-weary, numbed and demoralized by fifteen years of relentless bloodshed? Are they victims of belligerent forces, global and regional conspiracies, beyond their control? Or have they locked themselves in an escalating and intractable cycle of violence, almost akin to national suicide? Is there something inherent in the very nature of plural, fractured and small-scale social orders, as some observers have suggested recently, which renders violence an intrinsic part of a society’s ethos and mythology; a dreaded but ordinary vice?

In short, why have the Lebanese, traumatized by so much public havoc and private anguish, remained silent and impotent? Why have they failed to transmute their revulsion and mobilize their outrage against the sources violating and threatening their very existence as human beings? It is not the death of a nation-state that I am talking about. It has after all, become commonplace to characterize Lebanon and the Lebanese as deficient in civility. Hence, they are not expected, if one shares this bizarre view, to display any concern for threats to national identity or state sovereignty. But it is the innocent lives of random victims, private property and personal values which are being indiscriminately violated. Yet, the Lebanese remain quiescent and/or impotent in expressing and mobilizing their collective outrage.

Lebanon, once a haven for displaced groups, dissidents, renegades and those ideologically out of favour in adjacent regimes, now finds itself voiceless and abandoned. Even Lebanon’s detractors, who now seem eager to disparage its tragic descent into anomie, cannot deny the
vital role the country played in sheltering and articulating voices of
dissent in support of nationalist and emancipatory struggles. Virtually
all the crucial political and socio-cultural changes in the Arab world—
both those which ushered hope for national resurgence and those which
became sources of disunity and discordance—were inspired and given
vent in Lebanon. Pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, Arab and/or pro-
gressive socialism, regional and national Ba'thism, Lebanese secular-
ism, Syrian nationalism, resistance and liberation movements (Pales-
tinians and otherwise), communism and a score of other radical,
reactionary and reformist groups have all found, to varying degrees, a
receptive audience in Lebanon’s liberal political culture.

There is a painful irony in this. Deservedly or not, this once vibrant
republic, with more than a modicum of pluralist and democratic
institutions, has now degenerated into an ugly metaphor; a mere figure
of speech to highlight the most foreboding encounters elsewhere in the
world. When short on emotive expressions, ‘Lebanon’ is invoked to
conjure up images of the grotesque and unspoken. As a labelled entity,
one learns, like other damaged outcasts, to cope with the personal
insults one is subjected to as a Lebanese. When humour fails me, I
resort to other deft strategies to cope with such indignities. Hence, I
am no longer intimidated by being arbitrarily singled out and delayed
at airports, or as I observe the fear and suspicion my presence
provokes in others, or worse, the disbelief when strangers discover
that I am a Lebanese yet not totally bereft of human decency and
civility.

These and other hidden injuries are pardonable. The most injurious,
however, is when the label is reduced to a fiendish prop without
emotion; a mere foil to evoke the anguish of others. Over the past few
months this indignant label has popped up compulsively in an
incredible set of random but dreaded circumstances: a fireman fighting
a blaze in Philadelphia, the anguish of an AIDS victim, a jogger facing
the fearful prospects of Manhattan’s Central Park, survivals of a train
crash, dejected Vietnamese ‘boat people’, evacuees from China, and the
frenzy of delirious masses mourning Khomeini's death in Tehran. All were 'Lebanonized'.

Tabloids and other sensational images-makers may be forgiven these epithets. Seasoned editors, pundits and self-professed experts cannot. They, too, have maligned Lebanon. A favoured image currently in vogue among Washington's think tanks is that of a cesspool to be quarantined lest it spills over to contaminate adjoining regions. At best Lebanon is now seen as a dispensable nuisance; beyond understanding and beyond cure. Those who know better, alas, opt to remain silent. Career-conscious diplomats know too well that no one today is likely to enhance his or her stature and credibility by speaking out on Lebanon. Silence is golden. It is also the least risky and reprehensible, given Lebanon's seemingly intractable problems. Incidentally, quite a few of those who did speak out recently to express their outrage over Syria's ruthless bombardment of civilians (e.g. A. M. Rosenthal and Jean Kirkpatrick) were more alarmed at the prospect that these same guns could one day reach targets in Israel.

Even the most devoted Lebanese chauvinists find it difficult to whitewash their country's internal contradictions. Lebanon, after all, has always been a precarious, enigmatic and problematic entity: extremely difficult to manage politically or to piece together around a set of widely shared cohesive sentiments. Mounting internal tensions, compounded by a succession of self-serving and mindless politicians and unresolved regional rivalries, could only spell havoc even in the most coherent and viable of social orders. One marvels, in fact, over Lebanon's ability to withstand such pressures for so long.

Burdensome as these contradictions are, they do not fully account for the magnitude of fighting witnessed during the past few months. In this, as in earlier episodes of political violence, the interplay between internal disparities and foreign intervention has always been a destabilizing dialectic. Disadvantaged and/or threatened communities have always sought external patronage. Regional and international powers,
often for considerations unrelated to local grievances, step in only to exacerbate the cleavages within society.

Documenting one of the many versions of this ‘inside–outside’ polemic has become a familiar and futile elaboration of the obvious. Indeed, Lebanon’s public image is now indelibly associated with two intractable aberrations: chronic hostility; and obsessive dependence on, and often subservience to, external patronage. Throughout the war, cycles of violence were interspersed with efforts of foreign emissaries interceding on behalf of their shifting client groups to broker a short-lived cease-fire or an abortive political settlement. Lebanon’s political landscape is strewn with the wreckage of such failed efforts. Cease-fires, in fact, have become the butt of political humour and popular derision. As soon as one is declared, it is summarily violated. These are more ploys to win respites from the cruelties of war and recoup losses than genuine efforts to arrest the fighting and consider less belligerent strategies for resolving conflict.

Outsiders, both out of impotence or fear for their lives, are now understandably reluctant to step in. To many of the conventional brokers, in fact, chagrined by successive failures, Lebanon is more than just a nuisance. It has degenerated into a ravenous quagmire. As foreign brokers shy away, they are adamantly pursued by Lebanese officials and factional leaders alike. The image of foreign emissaries making guarded diplomatic pronouncements after their periodic meetings with prominent political actors is now displaced by its counterpart: that of Lebanese politicians shuttling back and forth from one capital to another soliciting the political favours of a sister state or a more distant regional or world power.

For the moment, Lebanon seems like a thorn in the flesh lodged stubbornly between two hostile monolithic regimes: Syria, a covetous ‘sister state’ bent on undermining the country’s autonomy, and the military Zionism of Israel. In pursuit of their own paranoic goals of ‘strategic parity’, both have amassed some of the most sophisticated war technologies in the world. Both use the pretext of their own
territorial security to violate Lebanon’s defenseless borders. And they do so with total disregard to human suffering, world opinion and UN resolutions. Both, incidentally, are the only two states which question Lebanon’s legitimacy as a sovereign nation. They contemptuously dismiss it as a flawed entity and artificial creation: at best, no more than a corridor to one and a security zone to the other; at worst, a proxy battlefield for their own military adventures. Given the vulnerability of local actors, both can always count on a rich assortment of surrogate client groups eager to sustain their deadly rhetoric.

Other regional powers have, of course, carved their own spheres of influence in Lebanon. Palestinians, Iranians, Libyans, Iraqis, among others, are now carrying out their own feuds and wars in this kaleidoscope of shifting alliances. Little wonder that Lebanon is perhaps the only sovereign nation which does not freely will its entry or exit from war. Yet the international community acts as though the Lebanese are victims of their own perversity.

René Girard, the French anthropologist, prefaces his perceptive analysis of *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) by proposing a sweeping but plausible thesis. ‘When unappeased,’ he argues, ‘violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand.’ While Girard’s insight might not account for every form of violence which has beleaguered Lebanon throughout its troubled political history, it does inform much of the latest cycle; particularly Syria’s ruthless bombardment of civilian targets in the Eastern suburbs of Beirut. Of course, the avowed enemies of Asad’s regime are elsewhere: Israel, Iraq and the PLO, to mention a few. All three, however, are neither as vulnerable at the moment nor as close at hand as Lebanon’s Christians. Asad can avenge his failure to retrieve the Golan, his dwarfed political stature, and his mounting internal problems by the brutal measures which have become the hallmarks of his repressive regime. Even those who speak admiringly of Asad are quick to admit that while age and maturity might have embellished his
political savvy, guile and penchant for survival, they have not, however, mellowed his proclivity for vengeance and personal enmity. He remains a sullen, vindictive man who does not take kindly to any challenges to his authority, particularly when provoked by seemingly lesser adversaries. The fears of the superpowers to incur Asad’s wrath, and the reluctance of the Arab League to coax him into withdrawal from Lebanon or to moderate his political whims, can only serve to reinforce his belligerency.

The silence and indifference of regional and global actors, deplorable as these might be, are understandable given the shifting diplomatic cross-currents and unresolved rivalries in the region. What is more bewildering is the silence of the Lebanese themselves. They are, after all, the ones taking the blows. They have known, to say the least, much better days. They have much to protest and much more to lose. Their silence also belies some of the distinctive features of their popular culture. They are normally disinclined to being reticent. Indeed, the pervasive mood of their everyday life, at least in good times, evinces little of the oppressive symptoms associated with despondency. The intimacy and gregariousness of close family ties and communal networks leave little room for brooding individuals to nurse their grievances in silence. Certainly these are not unmixed blessings. They have though, particularly in dark times, sheltered groups against the anomie of public life. If anything, the Lebanese have always been rather indulgent in their expectations of and zest for the good life. On the whole, it is a festive and outgoing culture, sustained by spirited and fun-loving activities and refusal to give up in the face of adversity.

With such a vibrant, resourceful heritage, how can one account for the failure of the Lebanese, particularly those most damaged by the cruelties of civil strife, to tap and regenerate inner forces for dissent and collective protest? What has muted their anguish and enfeebled their public outcry?

It is customary to seek answers to such queries in some variant of conspiracy theory or the tenets of national character studies. The
former largely absolves the Lebanese of any wrong-doing; the latter exaggerates the endemic character of hostility. Neither is fully adequate.

Pertinent as the foregoing questions are, they have been generally ignored by the voluminous literature on Lebanon. We know much more about the origins, patterns and forms of hostility, but much less about how the Lebanese are coping with, and reacting to, the forces threatening their existence. By identifying the possible factors associated with their muted protest—whether imposed or self-inflicted—we might gain further insight into an understanding of the nature and consequences of political violence. More important, one might offer a few hints as to how to break this silence in Lebanon and who, under the circumstances, is most qualified to speak for those bereft of speech.

This is not, incidentally, an idle and abstract conceptual exercise. As will be seen, the silent and/or silenced majority in Lebanon today, particularly those who are unwilling to abandon their country or consider any of the belligerent strategies for resisting banishment or the tyranny of police states, have only one option. They must muster the courage to speak out vehemently, in unison and in the only language available to them: the language of non-violent resistance.

The Cruelties of Relentless Violence

For almost fifteen years Lebanon has been besieged by every possible form of belligerency and collective terror: from the cruelties of factional and religious bigotry to the massive devastations wrought by private militias and state-sponsored armies. They have all generated an endless carnage of innocent victims and an immeasurable toll of human suffering.

Even by the most moderate of estimates, the magnitude of such damage to human life and property is staggering and perhaps unmatched by other comparable instances of political violence. At least 150,000 have perished, twice as many have been wounded and disabled, and close to two-thirds of the population have been uprooted from their
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homes and communities. For a small, dense and closely knit society of about 3.5 million and fewer than 4,000 square miles, such devastations are understandably menacing.

Less sensational but, perhaps, more damaging in the long run are some of the socio-psychological and moral concomitants of protracted hostility. Chaos, fear, and the vulgarization of public life have imperilled the frayed fabrics of the social order. The proverbial resourcefulness and resilience of the Lebanese, long emboldened by adversity, is displaying symptoms of erosion as both the magnitude of destruction and worsening living conditions have begun to tax the ordinary citizen's tolerance. The productive capacity of the economy—devastated by massive destruction of its industry, vital crops, and devaluation of its currency—hovers now on the brink of total collapse.

These ruinous features have also been exacerbated by a chronic haemorrhage in the skilled, enterprising and youthful segments of the population. Close to one-third of the Lebanese population, it is estimated, are either in temporary or permanent exile. What renders this more grievous is that a substantial portion of those who have left are professionals, technicians, entrepreneurs, intellectuals; i.e. groups much more likely or equipped to participate in whatever efforts of reconstruction Lebanon must face at some point in the future. A much larger number would most certainly opt to leave had they not been made captive by restrictive immigration policies and financial constraints. The Lebanese today, more so than ever before, are besieged in the most literal and poignant meaning of the term. All air and sea links with the outside world, legal and otherwise, have either ceased or been made extremely hazardous. Those unable or unwilling to use Syria as a port of exit, must resign themselves to suffering all the indignities of caged victims with no outlet from their captivity.

These and other gruesome horrors associated with such cruelties have, once again, invaded the public conscience. At least the media, if not the corridors of power, have been reawakened to Lebanon's long and unrelenting agony. Of course, only the sensational symptoms of
this slaughter of innocent and powerless victims are covered by the diminished cadre of foreign journalists. Reporters are not to be blamed. No one is spared in Lebanon these days. During the last cycle of intensive fighting, in one day in mid-March, more than 20,000 rockets and shells (thunderous explosions at the rate of 1 every 30 seconds) were indiscriminately fired across the confrontation lines of Beirut. For weeks shell-shocked and panic-stricken families cowered in basements and makeshift shelters. They wait for brief lulls to rush out for a breath of air and supplies. Lebanon is, without exaggeration, in a state of asphyxiation. More than ever before, the massive destruction of infrastructural facilities has generated acute shortages in fuel, water, power, and communication networks. Access to food supplies and other vital daily needs has become much too contingent, hazardous and prohibitive in price. Chilling episodes of unrescued victims and other casualties unable to reach emergency wards in time are legion. For a country whose educational, research and intellectual institutions and cultural products were once the envy of the region, schooling is being critically undermined by incessant interruptions. All formal instruction and scholastic programmes have been halted during the past three months. No resumption is imminent.

Living with contingency and chronic fear has, over the years, sharpened and enriched the adaptive strategies of the Lebanese. Perhaps they have become much too adept at coping with adversity. Could it not be that their proverbial flair for survival has already become counter-productive? They endure, but they have been diminished, numbed and calloused in the process. Perhaps had they cried foul earlier and displayed some legitimate symptoms of war-weariness and disbelief in the efficacy of violent politics, the world might have been more receptive and sympathetic to their anguish.

These and other cruelties not only persist and grow in intensity, they have become normalized. To paraphrase Judith Shklar, they are transformed into an 'ordinary vice'; something that, although horrible, is expectable. The grotesque become mundane. The dreadful is no
longer dreaded. Ordinary God-fearing citizens may easily find themselves engaged in events or condoning acts which once provoked their scorn and disgust.

The manifestations of such normalization are legion. In the early stages of the war, when bearing arms and combat assumed redemptive features, any identification with the garb, demeanour or life-style of fighters and militia groups became almost chic; a fashionable mode of empowerment and enhancing one's machismo. Belligerency, in fact, was so stylized that groups disfigured themselves to ape such identities. Bit by bit, even the most grotesque attributes of the war became accepted as normal appendages to rampant chaos and fear. Literary accounts and personal diaries, often in highly evocative tones, recorded such pathologies with abandon. The daily body count was greeted with the same matter-of-factness of a weather forecast. Fallen bodies, kidnapped victims and other casualties of indiscriminate violence became, as it were, the barometer by which a besieged society measured its daily cycles.

Even the deadly rhetoric and discourse of bitter hostility was neutralized. In daily parlance, the war became Ahdath, a mere event or occurrence, stripped of any belligerent undertones. Children's games, their language, their cognitive and playful interests were all warlike in tone and substance. Their makeshift toys, much like their fairy-tales and legends, mimicked the cruelties of the war. They competed and took pride in their knowledge of sophisticated weaponry and the logistics of armed struggle. All their daily routines and conventional modes of behaviour—their schooling, eating and sleeping habits, playgrounds, encounters with others, perceptions, daydreams and nightmares, their heroes and role models, etc.—have all been inexorably wrapped up in the omnipresence of death.

There is hardly any aspect of their lives, and this is certainly more so for adolescents who are involuntarily drawn into the fray of battle, that is exempt from such harrowing encounters. They have all been homogenized by the cruelties of indiscriminate killing and perpetual
anxieties over the loss of parents and family members. These and other such threats, deprivations and indignities continue to consume their psychic energies and traumatize their daily lives. Successive generations of adolescents have, in fact, known little else.

More important, perhaps, with the collapse of state authority, the war generated and institutionalized its own roles, groups and networks. Gradually it evolved into a system of its own, with its particular structures and interrelated web of rules and obligations. Individuals and agencies who provided access to amenities, vital resources, information, smuggled goods, black markets and war booty, found new shortcuts and other avenues for empowerment and enhanced status. Some were propelled into folk heroes. Others, almost overnight, became acclaimed public figures with no legitimate claims for their prominence other than the access they provided for coveted goods and services. The burgeoning informal economy created extortion rackets and an underclass of new war-lords and profiteers. These well-placed individuals are understandably reluctant to put an end to a situation which has become their lifeline for power and wealth. They all have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo of belligerency.

This is what has been happening in Lebanon: a gradual pernicious process whereby some of the appalling features of conflict are being normalized. Indeed, groups engaged in such cruelties feel that they have received permission, some kind of cultural sanction or legitimization, for their evil deeds.

Such normalization is, doubtless, a reflection of the protracted and insoluble character of this conflict. It often results in 'tunnel vision'; i.e. a tendency to focus, almost obsessively, on one's involvement to the exclusion of any other relevant course of action. In acute cases, every action, every statement, and every institution today acquires value and meaning in relation to hostility. It is an absorbing concern that overshadows many other societal and individual interests. Violence is not only the most probable cause of death. It has become, cliché notwithstanding, a way of life. It's the only way the Lebanese can make
a statement, and assert their damaged identities. Without access to instruments of violence, one is powerless. The meek inherit nothing. They are also bereft of speech.

Such crude realities are not only mimicked and reinforced by foreign journalists. More distressing, similar manifestations have become recently more visible among opinion and policy makers in Washington circles. They, too, are becoming increasingly oblivious to, or uninterested in, the views of non-militant groups or individuals. Hence, some of the more sobering and reconciliatory voices, in Lebanon, particularly those who have not been as actively involved in direct hostility (e.g. Greek Orthodox, Sunni Muslims, Roman Catholics, among others) are rarely given their due. Once again, unless groups have some access to the instruments or rhetoric of war, they forfeit their privilege to be heard or taken seriously.

Contentious groups in Lebanon, like others locked in protracted conflict, tend to perceive combatants as members of a category or group rather than as individuals. Such ‘deindividuation’, social-psychologists remind us, encourages belligerency by eroding inhibitions against such violent predispositions. When people are deindividuated they seem less human and, hence, less protected by conventional norms against aggression. Deindividuation of one’s enemies makes it easier to inflict injury upon them. As sub-human, they are reduced to material to be acted upon. It also obviates much of the guilt associated with reckless violence; particularly when ‘others’ might well be co-religionists or compatriots they coexisted with previously.

Over the past fifteen years, as the psychological and ecological barriers between adversaries have become more intractable, people have had fewer contacts with others. Many Lebanese are now growing up in constricted worlds with hardly any face-to-face interaction or personal knowledge of other groups. Deindividuation, under such circumstances, becomes easier. Antagonists feel more comfortable about the merciless suffering they inflict on their invented enemies.
They can now kill with impunity and without guilt. In such a milieu, each is a patriot, none a murderer.

Given these atrocities, it is understandable how their perpetrators become callous and implacable. They cannot survive otherwise. All combatants embroiled in vengeful hostility internalize a certain measure of 'psychic numbing'. As a captive audience, the Lebanese, in general, are now displaying more than a fair share of such symptoms. They, too, evince this progressive erosion of their capacity to empathize with other victims, and a general desensitization to indiscriminate killing.

In this sense, the experiences of the Lebanese poignantly epitomize the three socio-cultural elements Paul Ricoeur attributes to any form of human evil: namely, defilement, sin and guilt. By defiling and de-humanizing the 'other', it is much easier to sanction killing and hence create conditions for guilt-free massacres. No act today exemplifies this type of wanton violence more than the car bomb, elevated in Lebanon to a devastating form of ruthless mass murder. A car packed with explosives is left in an urban district, often detonated by remote control at times of greatest density. It is highly impersonal, requiring no contact between offender and victims. No one claims responsibility. No demands are issued. In this sense, it is unlike other dramatic acts of public protest, including even hijacking and suicidal car bombs. It is pure punitive rage in its most savage form. The intent is to inflict the heaviest possible toll of human life. Though the casualties are often fortuitous (e.g. shoppers, a religious congregation, a movie audience, and other innocent bystanders), they are not entirely randomized. Since urban quarters in Lebanon are becoming confessionally more homogeneous, victims are more likely to belong to one exclusive group or religious community; thus provoking a similar vengeful act on the 'other' normally held accountable whether guilty or not. In fact, perpetrators of these acts, quite cognizant of reciprocation, clearly must have such intentions in mind: a chain reaction of relentless carnage.
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The shelling and counter-shelling of residential quarters which has devastated Beirut during the past three months is another equally impersonal and indiscriminate form of mass murder. The victims, here as well, are overwhelmingly innocent citizens.

The relentless suffering of the Lebanese also epitomizes another curious attribute: the ethos of 'no victor, no vanquished' which has long characterized its strife-torn political history. Even bloody and often decisive confrontations were never permitted to end by the unequivocal victory or defeat of one group by the other. External patrons, often for considerations unrelated to the indigenous conflict, intercede on behalf of their respective client groups. Instances of such meddling are legion. So are the alibis. In the name of amity, equity, balance, stability, peace, geopolitical considerations, power-brokers have never shied away from such alibis to rationalize or disguise their intervention. In fact, at times, like the proverbial fearless fools rushing in, they too have been embroiled in the country's quagmire—thereby exacerbating the tension they intended to contain. Their embattled client groups are transformed, as in earlier such episodes, into passive, helpless pawns caught up in a vortex of shifting alliances. Unwillingly, Lebanon once again becomes the proxy killing fields for the wars of others. For the time being it looks as though the bitter hostility between the veteran foes of Arab politics—Asad of Syria and Hussein of Iraq—will shift from the Gulf to Lebanon's ravaged landscape. At the time of writing, Lebanon also seems at the mercy of another Arab League mediation effort, as ambiguous and tenuous as its dithering and ill-fated predecessors. In all fairness, the Arab Summit's final communiqué (Casablanca, May 23, 1989) spelled out some promising stipulations (e.g. the preservation of Lebanon's sovereignty, autonomy and independence and called for the Lebanese parliament to meet and draw up a list of political reforms, to be followed by the election of a new president who would then form a national reconciliation cabinet, etc.). The Summit, however, had a hidden agenda disguising a more pernicious quid pro quo. In effect, the Arab League will refrain in its
attempts to coax Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon in return for Asad’s readmission of Egypt into Arab ranks and a more moderating stance regarding the PLO. Already, as a gesture of good will, Syria has released 140 members of Arafat’s mainline Fatah movement, along with a score of the Sunni Muslim fundamentalist faction, those of Sheikh Shaaban of Tripoli.

Such measures, however, are destined to embroil Lebanon deeper in the intractable hostilities of the region and, in doing so, deflect and postpone the resolution of its own internal problems. Hence, as in earlier episodes of political violence, the issues which might have provoked the initial fighting are never explicitly resolved. It is in this profound sense that wars in Lebanon are a costly and futile exercise. If there is any logic inherent in the structure of war—any war—just or unjust, it is normally a derivative of some of the assumed benefits the victors come to enjoy. For only at the end of the war do the rewards of victory occur. Alas, in Lebanon wars never seem to end in this explicit manner. Hence the belligerent equality has never transformed itself into the peaceful inequality that entails the designation of one as victor and the other as vanquished. Despite the intensity, massiveness and depth of damage and injury, the war goes on. There is perpetual hurt and grief with no hope for deliverance or a temporary reprieve.

A recent book by Bowyer-Bell on civil strife in Ireland, The Gun in Politics (Transaction, 1987), expresses this poignant dilemma in terms which apply to Lebanon as well:

Every civil war ends with the effect of a revolution: the construction of a society with institutions and values that create an intolerable life for a substantial portion of the defeated, whose very identities had been first transformed by the polarization and then shattered. The vicious, almost permanent psychic wounds of civil war are less a result of the cruelty of the contest, the extensive violence, battles of vengeance, and wanton destruction, than of the
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‘intolerable’ terms of defeat, which must be ‘tolerated’ by one side and imposed, year after year, by the other.

All the adversaries in Lebanon must, doubtless, realize that they are likewise caught in this predicament. They, too, have opted to suffer the more ‘tolerable’ cruelties of protracted strife rather than the ‘intolerable’ psychic wounds of defeat. Since, to many, particularly the external actors and their surrogate mercenaries, sustaining the war has meant no more than a discourse of belligerency, with its warring postures and rhetorical gestures, it is clearly more dignifying than the humiliation of defeat.

Muted public protest

The foregoing considerations, persuasive as they are, do not fully account for the absence and muted character of public protests in Lebanon. In all open and not-so-open societies, chronic victims of collective suffering often sense that their problems are invisible to others. Even in the most repressive regimes, as the stunning uprisings in China, Poland, the Soviet Union and the West Bank so vividly demonstrate, the indignant do find the means to express their outrage. If unable to mobilize their collective grievances, they can at least arouse public attention.

The Lebanese, it must be acknowledged, have not been completely lethargic. Throughout the initial stages of the war, before their outrage had slipped into despair, they experimented with different modes of disavowing and/or distancing themselves from the cruelties of violent politics. Artists, poets, playwrights, intellectuals and liberals of all persuasions found much to decry and to sustain their disdain. The war, in fact, inspired a group of so-called ‘Decentrist’ women writers to create a genre that transforms the havoc and personal anguish into felicitous and evocative sources of creative energy. Other equally impassioned and creative outbursts found outlets in political humour, popular songs and clandestine radio programmes.
These, like other indignant voices, remained disparate and muted. They never evolved nor did they energize any concerted and organized dissent. A genuine attempt, for example, to organize a peace march in the spring of 1984, part of a burgeoning peace movement, failed to materialize despite the media attention it inspired. Protests by mothers and relatives of kidnapped victims, demonstrations against lawlessness and shortages in public amenities, much like the general work-stoppage by labour unions in the fall of 1987, rarely transcended the local communities from which they emerged.

More perplexing, when national figures or charismatic leaders arose (e.g. Kamal Junblat, Musa al-Sadr, Bashir Gemayel, Rashid Karameh and more recently Hasan al-Khalid, the Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon) and awakened dispositions for reconciliation and coexistence, they disappeared under mysterious circumstances. All five incidentally, like many less prominent victims, emerged initially as spokesmen for their own constricted constituencies. The moment, however, they displayed potential for transcending communal loyalties and inspiring national consciousness, they were promptly eliminated.

This enfeebled character of public protest, I wish to suggest, is largely a by-product of three disheartening realities—disheartening, because they all reflect increasingly insurmountable features.

First, this muted public protest might well be endemic to the relentless and intensifying kind of violence the Lebanese have been beset with. Unlike other encounters with civil unrest, which are often swift, decisive, and localized, and where a sizable part of the population could remain sheltered from its traumatizing impact, the Lebanese experience has been much more protracted and diffuse. The savagery of violence is also compounded by its randomness. In this sense, there is hardly a Lebanese today who has not experienced these atrocities either directly or indirectly. Violence and terror have touched virtually everyone. They are everywhere and nowhere. They are everywhere because they can no longer be confined to one specific area or to a few combatants. They are nowhere because they cannot be identified or
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linked to one concrete cause. Recurring cycles of violence erupt, fade, and resurface again for no recognizable or coherent reason.

Perhaps more poignant is the way the Lebanese are being maligned and humiliated by making the things that were once sources of national pride and resourcefulness seem futile, trivial and pathological. Consider what happens when a child’s most precious possessions—things around which he weaves fantasies and make him a bit different from all others—are redefined as worthless. In a sense, this is what has been happening to the Lebanese. Their country’s plural and open institutions, which as sources of tolerance and coexistence had once set it apart from its adjoining repressive, monolithic political cultures, are now dismissed as aberrant. The humiliation is compounded when these same regimes, known for their antipathy to even the rudiments of free and liberal democracies, become the spokesmen for reform, equity and justice.

There is something in the very character of intense pain, Elaine Scarry tells us in her extraordinary and brilliant book, which is ‘language destroying’. ‘As the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates . . . world, self, and voice are lost, or nearly lost, through the intense pain.’ (The Body in Pain, Oxford, 1985). This is also a reflection of the fact that people in pain are ordinarily bereft of the resources of speech. It is not surprising that the language for pain should in such instances often be evoked by those who are not themselves in pain but by those who speak on behalf of those who are. Richard Rorty expresses the same thought in his most recent book, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge, 1989). He, too, tells us that

victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of language. That is why there is no such thing as the ‘voice of the oppressed’ or the ‘language of the victims.’ The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words
together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else.

Second, the muted public protest of the Lebanese is also a reflection of the deep fissions within society. The country is now splintered into all sorts of quasi-groups, communities, confessions, neighbourhoods, fronts, militias; even the street is recognized as a political entity. There are, however, no ‘publics’ capable of transcending such parochial milieux to articulate common societal issues. In this sense they remain powerless to express their resentment. So paranoic and fractious has the social fabric become that groups can no longer hear or recognize, let alone empathize with, the screams of others. Even members of the same family or community, who are ordinarily benevolent and compassionate towards their own kin, are too preoccupied with nursing their own searing pain and fears to take any notice of the suffering of others. Hence groups are unable to cry out in unison to amplify their collective suffering. It is little wonder that all attempts to lift the inarticulate pre-language of ‘cries and whispers’ into the realm of shared objectification—to borrow Elaine Scarry’s expression—have so far failed.

Third, unlike other comparable experiences with protracted civil violence (e.g. Spain, Ireland, Cyprus, Palestine), hostility has not been confined to a limited and well-defined number of combatants. At last count (spring of 1984), it had already involved no fewer than 186 warring factions, with different backgrounds, ideologies, sponsors, grievances, visions, and justifications as to why they had resorted to armed struggle. The sheer logistics and demography of violence—keeping a coherent account of who has been fighting whom, where and why—is a dizzying task.

It is this bewildering number of adversaries and shifting targets of hostility which render the Lebanese experience all the more painful. Palestinians, Jews, Armenians, Kurds, Corsicans, Ulster Catholics, Basques and other victims of collective suffering are, in this regard, more privileged. They can, at least, identify and mobilize their outrage
against those who are held accountable for their suffering. They are also equally aroused by an exaggerated sense of group solidarity and a passionate hostility to others. They are, likewise, impelled by an urge to reassemble a damaged identity and broken history. They know too well who their enemies are. Indeed, the Jews have mounted, perhaps, one of the most highly organized campaigns for tracking suspects and adjudicating crimes committed against them.

The Lebanese cannot even vindicate their collective grievances. They are homogenized by terror and grief, but remain divided and powerless in identifying and coping with the sources of their anguish. Hence, they are gripped by a crushing sense of impotence and entropy. They are bitter, but cannot direct or mobilize their fury towards recognized targets. In the absence of such identifiable enemies, the likelihood of an 'intifadah', a 'solidarity', or of finding other regenerative sources of collective dissent, are extremely slight.

**Breaking the silence**

How can the Lebanese break out of the grooves of their embattled communities in this escalating cycle of political violence? Is the country doomed, because of the political mismanagement of its internal differences, to remain at the mercy of regional and superpower rivalries?

If it is legitimate for foreign powers to insist that the Lebanese get their act together by putting their own house in order, is it not equally legitimate for the Lebanese to expect foreigners to suspend their meddlesome interventions?

If left to their own, the Lebanese can work out—as they have done at different intervals and with varying degrees of success—a power-sharing formula and arrive at some consensus over the broad outlines of future reforms. On their own, however, the Lebanese cannot possibly retrieve their country from all foreign occupations, nor can they be expected to neutralize the destabilizing impact of such forces.
Differences among the Lebanese are not, after all, the only sources which initiated and sustained the intensity of civil strife. Indeed, the presence of Syrians, Israelis, Palestinians, Iraqis, Iranians, Libyans, and the intractable hostility between them, has generated much more bloodshed and destruction than the communal wars of the Lebanese. The direct involvement of Syria’s armed forces in intensifying the magnitude of hostility in recent months has, once again, spotlighted her role as the principal actor today in Lebanon.

Why or how Syria came into Lebanon is not the issue. Asad’s motives are much too complex. So, too, are the geopolitical considerations. What is clear, however, is that Asad was extremely alarmed at the spectre of the likely outcome of continued unrest in Lebanon. Patrick Seale sums up Asad’s predicament at the time:

"Either the Maronites would set up a separate state, which would bring Israel in as its protector, or the radicals with Palestinian backing would beat the Maronites, which would bring Israel in as punisher. If Syria intervened, it faced defeat; if it remained on the sidelines, Lebanon would fall to the enemy. (Seale, 1988: 276)"

What is equally clear is that Syria’s intervention was part of a US–Israeli–Syrian secret accord (that infamous ‘Red-Line’ agreement in the spring of 1976, the brainchild of one of Kissinger’s manipulative diplomatic feats) whereby Syria would move into Lebanon to contain the Palestinians and their radical allies with the assurance that Israel would not interfere. From then on, the White House expressed approval for Syria’s ‘constructive’ role in Lebanon.

Of course the outcomes to all concerned, Lebanon in particular, have been anything but constructive. Again in the words of Patrick Seale, a veteran and sympathetic watcher of Syria and Asad:

"The Christians were thankless, the Druzes bitter, radicals of all shades vengeful, the Palestinians hostile and still in arms,"
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and Israel, now as much a part of the Lebanese scene as Syria itself, able to tweak Asad’s tail at will. In defense of his strategic environment, Asad had fallen into the Lebannesque quagmire. (Seale, 1988: 289)

The quagmire as a result became murkier and more horrendous. Since 1976 Syria’s so-called ‘peace-keeping’ forces, some 40,000 strong, have been occupying nearly 70 per cent of Lebanon’s territory. They clearly have not brought Lebanon’s warring factions any closer together. Instead, they have taken an active part in the hostilities, often shifting their alignments with the adversaries at will and with only Syria’s strategic interests in mind. They have ransacked Lebanon’s resources, manipulated its leaders, maligned its institutions and terrorized large segments of its population. The impact of the Israeli invasion of 1982 and its aftermath, the in-fighting between PLO factions and all the other surrogate militias and ideological groups, all intimately associated with Syria’s presence, have been equally grievous.

What future prospects can one envisage which might offer Lebanon less belligerent options for coexistence between communities caught up in such a menacing political landscape?

Political forecasts in Lebanon, even in less troubled times, have always been fraught with uncertainty. The destabilizing consequences of the ‘outside-inside’ dialectic have reached acute proportions. They are again a stark reminder of one inescapable truth: unless efforts are made to protect or isolate Lebanon from the destabilizing impact of regional rivalries, Lebanon will most certainly continue to be the surrogate killing field of its own and other people’s unappeased hostilities.

The efforts that the Lebanese expect bear no trace to the archaic artefacts of gunboat diplomacy. The Sixth Fleet and other forms of military presence, even those of neutral peace-keeping forces (UNIFEL and the like), have not been effective. However, the Lebanese do harbour a few legitimate expectations. First, many of the recent
evacuees from Lebanon cannot restrain their bitter disillusionment with America's deafening silence and indifference. They fail to understand why Americans, normally so quick to vent outrage at wanton killing elsewhere, manage to be so oblivious to Lebanon's suffering. Second, since the US along with other regional and world powers are largely responsible for initiating or sanctioning the presence of foreign forces in their country, they must be held accountable for hastening their exit.

An upsurge in recent diplomatic initiatives offers some promising signs of change in that direction, faint though they seem at the moment. The Arab League Mediation committee—the troika of heads of state of Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Algeria—has been restraining Syria's military presence, particularly in lifting its blockade on the Christian enclave and in toning down General Aoun's belligerent call for a 'war of liberation'. Likewise, the United States has recently applied pressure on Iraq to halt its arms shipments to Christian forces. If these efforts are extended to expedite Israel's ultimate withdrawal from South Lebanon, then the current cease-fire, shaky as it is, might be the dawn of Lebanon's belated spring. At least the coming few months (the troika's mandate expires in November) will most certainly prefigure much of what lies ahead: a miraculous regeneration and return to sanity or further vengeful bloodletting and dismemberment.

Optimistic scenarios are hard to come by in Lebanon. They are more the stuff of elusive dreams than tangible political realities. Certainly the fate of countless earlier such abortive efforts leave little room for hope. I have had though the occasion lately of meeting and listening to recent evacuees from Lebanon; groups drawn from different regions, religious affiliations and ideological leanings. For the first time I saw evidence of sentiments, inferences, expressions that might prod one to entertain the likelihood of a more auspicious turn of events. I wish to advance the following by disclosing the sources of such cautious optimism.

1. There are symptoms, often hesitantly expressed, of a belated awakening that the things that the Lebanese share are greater than
those that pull them apart. Expressed more concretely: if it has been difficult for the Lebanese to live together, it is extremely unlikely that they can live apart.

Lebanon's troubled history with pluralism—both distant and most recent—leaves little room for further experimentation. Of all encounters with many of its varied forms—coexistence, guarded contact, compromise and integration—the political management of separate, exclusive and self-contained entities has always been the most costly and short-lived. The calls for 'cantonization', 'federalism', or other 'partitioning' and 'dismantlement' schemes, like earlier such experiments, are byproducts of xenophobic fears and vengeful impulses. They are impelled by a merging of parochial interests and short-term political expediency, not by genuine efforts to coalesce identities. Even the return to the status quo ante is no longer feasible or acceptable.

All such appeals, though understandable in the aftermath of widespread fear and distrust, are not viable sources of socio-economic and political mobilization. Nor can they inspire any cultural rejuvenation. They can only inculcate further dogmatism and intolerance. More disquieting, they are inclined to stifle cultural and intellectual experimentation and generate the stupefaction typical of the joyless lifestyles of all closed societies.

2. Despite their many differences, the Lebanese have been homogenized by chronic violence. As one listens to their travails, sustained by the omnipresence of grief, fear and uncertainty and their obsession with the vicissitudes of survival, one hears essentially the same tale. Of course, the sharp and diverse perceptions inherent in the bewildering mire of Lebanese factionalism are still there. They seem muted, however, in the face of the pervasive fears that all groups are beset with. They might express and rationalize their fears differently, hold different sources accountable for their plight and entertain different visions for Lebanon's future. They all, however, seem to harbour essentially one of three primal fears: the fear of being marginalized, assimilated or
banished. It is in this profound existential sense that no group today has any justification to feel more or less privileged than others. They have all been levelled by the profusion of such fears.

These fears, real or imagined, have reawakened communal identities and intensified the magnitude of enmity. All groups today, some more than others, perceive themselves threatened. Ubiquitous fear, more perhaps than any other element, serves now as the glue to hold the tenuous fragments of society together.

The recent round of hostilities, by pitting the two major adversaries (Syria and its allies against the Lebanese armed forces), has galvanized resistance to the tyranny of foreign occupation. General Aoun’s defiance of Syria’s guns, foolhardy as it may seem now as an act of reprisal, may prove to be quite redemptive as a new opening for less destructive options to resolve the conflict. Aoun has replied in the only language belligerents understand: vengeance. Innocent victims in Lebanon do not lack an advocate anymore. Belligerents can no longer sustain their indiscriminate shelling without risk of reprisal.

Listening to colleagues and friends who suffered the recent atrocities, one senses a more resolute determination and spirit of defiance, much like those endured by other victims of massive bombardment. Perhaps because this time they could identify the intentions of the aggressors, they felt more fortified and united. It brought to mind Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s evocative descriptions of the bombardment of Barcelona and Madrid during the Spanish Civil War.

But a bombardment turns against the bombarder! Each shell that fell upon Madrid fortified something in the town. It persuaded the hesitant neutral to plump for the defenders. A dead child weighs heavily in the balance when it is one’s own. It was clear to me that a bombardment did not disperse—it unified. Horror causes men to clench their fists, and in horror men join together . . . Madrid stood erect, receiving blows without a moan. But men are like this:
slowly but surely, ordeal fortifies their virtues. (Saint-Exupery, 1986: 73).

3. Vital as the recent events have been in summoning spirits of fortitude, many Lebanese are finally beginning to question the efficacy of violent politics. Gone are many of the earlier rationalizations that embattled groups indulged in to sanction their armed struggle. One hears more moderating and conciliatory voices; more earnest pleas to end the bloodshed and support the Arab League’s mediation efforts. If such efforts fail, no one can possibly entertain any prospects other than Lebanon’s further descent into anarchy. More groups, in virtually all of Lebanon’s enclaves, are now acting on their beliefs that civil strife has become self-defeating.

4. The cruelties of the past few months have also helped to break the silence. World powers and regional leaders might continue to demur, but the Lebanese have managed to reawaken interest in their country’s neglected agony. Silenced groups, particularly exiled writers and journalists, have summoned enough courage to write passionate outcries denouncing Syria’s repressive interventions. Their enraged cries have inspired some of the world’s most erudite editors and commentators to make similar appeals on behalf of Lebanon’s violated but abandoned citizens. European powers, France in particular, have launched a concerted diplomatic initiative. Emigrants in all continents are beginning to organize task forces, lobby groups and campaigns to rouse interest and mobilize public opinion. Rallies, marches, special church masses, and panels have been held. Cardinals, archbishops and other prelates and church groups have issued heart-rending proclamations. Prominent public figures of Lebanese descent have deployed their networks to pressure the White House and Washington officials to add their weight to diplomatic efforts underway.

In short, the Lebanese have now, for better or worse, the eyes and ears of the world. This moment is not likely to stretch for too long or to
resurface again. They must start saying and doing things they have not tried before. Otherwise, the world will turn askance again. The belligerents have besieged the country for fifteen years. They have experimented with every conceivable form of human violence and perfidy. They have also invented some treacherous ones of their own. They have made pacts with enemies and brutalized their compatriots. They have been sustained by little else other than the frenzy of hatred.

The din and rhetoric of war has been the only voice; the deadly language of predatory violence. The rest have had to suffer their indignities and fury in silence, much like hostages incarcerated against their will. If countries can be hijacked, Lebanon is clearly one such victim. The indignities the Lebanese have had to suffer are even more abusive and intimidating. Neither their captors nor their demands are always identifiable.

How can the Lebanese, particularly those rendered speechless by the harrowing events of the past fifteen years, marshal sources of protest and mobilization for non-violent change? The silent and silenced must restore their ability to speak out. But who is to liberate the alienated energies of the silenced majority?

Clearly not all the Lebanese are fit to speak any more. Many have either been discredited or have forfeited their credibility to do so. The war-lords and their mercenaries have too much blood on their hands. Others are much too numb or afraid to speak out. Many are crushed by their own impotence and futility and have come to believe that nothing that they can do or say will ever change the menacing course of events.

Outsiders, as the recent display of sympathy in the international community attest, can still mobilize some concern on behalf of the Lebanese. With all its blemishes Lebanon somehow retains a residue of compassionate friends. Spain's experience during its civil war once again comes to mind. Lebanon is clearly not what Spain was then to the rest of the world. Both, however, may be seen as threatened democratically elected republics. George Orwell fought in the trenches; Dorothy Parker braved the front lines; W. H. Auden served as a
stretcher bearer; Hemingway and Dos Passos dodged bullets to film a
documentary. Others, like Beckett, Faulkner, Picasso and Thomas
Mann spoke out vehemently from their home communities (see edited
volume by John Miller, 1986).

Lebanon may not be privileged to elicit such voices, but the country
is still not short on visionary leaders and other spokesmen who have
not been tainted or demoralized by the war—visionary, in the sense
that they cherish Lebanon’s plural and open character but are also
committed to basic reforms. They recognize its ‘Arab identity’ without
undermining its autonomy and sovereignty. Nor is Lebanon short on
resourceful, enterprising individuals who are eager to discover and tap
internal forces of recovery. Economic reconstruction and social re-
habilitation will not be problematic given the pool of talent and human
resources that Lebanese, at home and in temporary exile, can poten-
tially mobilize.

Lebanon’s most critical issue at the moment, one which is likely to
prefigure much of what lies ahead, is inextricably linked to the outcome
of the mediation efforts currently underway. If external sources of
instability are contained, the voiceless have now an opportune moment
to speak out. Perhaps this is their only chance. Enough has been done
already by way of evoking moral outrage against terror and the
slaughter of innocent people. The Goliath of cruel repression is
momentarily subdued. If they are to ward off his re-emergence, the
Lebanese have no other option but to restore their ability to articulate
new strategies for peaceful coexistence.

To paraphrase Albert Hirschman’s seminal metaphors of Exit,
Voice and Loyalty (1970), Lebanon’s predicament at the moment is no
longer a choice between articulation and desertion, but between
articulation and death. Since, as we have seen, ‘exit’ is no longer
possible for many Lebanese, ‘voice’ is their only source of salvation.
Voice, in other words, must be used not just to postpone exit, not the
last gasp before death, but as an opportunity to act and react with
unexpected vigour.
What about ‘loyalty’?

The cruelties of war have understandably parochialized the loyalties of the Lebanese. The uprooted and traumatized seek shelter now in their communal solidarities, particularly those with the same confessional loyalties. Hence today more and more Lebanese are brandishing their confessionalism, to invoke another metaphor, as both emblem and armour. Emblem, because confessional identity has become the most viable medium for asserting presence and securing vital needs and benefits. Without it groups are rootless, nameless, and voiceless. One is not heard or recognized unless confessional allegiance is first disclosed. Confessionalism also is being used as armour, because it has become a shield against real or imagined threats. The more vulnerable the emblem, the thicker the armour. Conversely, the thicker the armour, the more vulnerable and paranoic other communities become. It is precisely this dialectic between threatened communities and the urge to seek shelter in cloistered worlds which has plagued Lebanon for so long.

Massive population shifts, particularly since they have been accompanied by the reintegration of displaced groups into more homogeneous, self-contained and exclusive communities, have also reinforced communal solidarity. Consequently, territorial and confessional identities, more so perhaps than at any other time in Lebanon’s eventful history, are beginning to converge. Such realities can no longer be wished away or mystified. They must be recognized for what they are: strategies for the empowerment of threatened groups and their incorporation into the torrent of public life. The coalition of confessional and territorial entities, since it draws upon a potentially much larger base of support, is doubtless a more viable vector for political mobilization than kinship, fealty or sectarian loyalties.

Pathological as they seem at the moment, such communal solidarieties need not continue to be sources of paranoia and hostility. They could be extended and enriched as sources of loyalty to incorporate other more secular and civic identities. If stripped of their bigotry and
intolerance, they could also become the bases for equitable and judicious forms of power sharing and the articulation of new cultural identities. Here lies the hope, the only hope, for an optimal restructuring of Lebanon's pluralism.

This is not another elusive dream. Just as enmity has been socially constructed and culturally sanctioned, it can also be unlearned. If judiciously restructured, group loyalties could, as Hirschman reminds us, 'hold exit at bay and activate voice'. Under visionary and enlightened leadership, individuals can at least be resocialized to perceive differences not as dreaded symptoms of distrust, fear and exclusion but as manifestations of cultural diversity and enrichment.

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