

The wealth mirage hides the seeds of hatred

Lebanon, Devil's labyrinth

For sixteen years, it was a war of everyone against everyone. Then the "Pax Syriana" came. But behind the frenzied reconstruction in progress, there is a frustrated and resentful nation. Travel in the wealthy squalor of former "Middle East Switzerland"

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"Lebanon is more than a country, Lebanon is a mission". According to the Pope. It was May 1997, the visit of John Paul II was an adrenaline jolt for Beirut, a city became synonymous with civil war, involved in a great work of reconstruction. But all the concrete unloaded on the land of the cedars, all the cranes and bulldozers in the world are not enough to rebuild a soul.

Today Lebanon is less, much less than a nation, and the mission the pope was referring to (establishing a harmonious coexistence between different religious communities) seems an impossible mission. Because the dominant feeling is the one indicated by Arabic word "ihbat": difficult translation, "liabilities", "frustration", something that deals with having failed. Between resignation and despair.

"If you want to understand Lebanon, you have to forget all of Western categories", says Michel Touma, a journalist of the newspaper "L'Orient - Le Jour" (Christian and French area). "For example, there is no political concept of right and left, we are in the Middle East". And what is there, then? The political sectarianism: a religion, a party (or leader or movement). Seventeen different communities (from Greek-orthodox to Druze). Plus the divisions for trends, clans, families. Plus international interests, Israel, Syria, Palestinians, U.S.A. policy, Islamic fundamentalism, the petrodollars, savage capitalism.

Welcome to the labyrinth of hell, where truth is always a half, where they killed in the name of God, but they only and always love the money. Where no one is innocent, but they prefer to think that nobody is guilty, so, according to a common thought "Lebanese do not know why the war started and do not know because it's over."

Maybe they do not know why the war is over, but surely they know how. With a massive Syrian military intervention (there are currently 40,000 troops from Damascus in Lebanon).

Assad got the green light from Americans for his support to the war against Saddam Hussein (his historic rival). Formally, Syrian presence was justified by the bilateral agreements of May 1991, but everything was already foreseen in the Treaty of Taif in October 1989, called, ironically, "charter of national reconciliation" and it provides the legal basis of Lebanon today.

In Taif Agreement, there is all historical and current malaise of Lebanon. It is a masterpiece of Realpolitik, diplomatic hypocrisy, that somehow works, because it provides order, stability.

Dictated by mere necessity, Taif Agreement was an alternative like "drinking or drowning" and it was accepted by Lebanese as a lesser evil (those who did not ended up in exile or in jail).

The endless Lebanese civil war, similar to a national championship of death with at least nine teams (Christians of General Aoun, those of Geagea (already "Phalanx" then "Lebanese Forces"); Druze of Jumblatt, Amal's Shiite, Hizballah Shiite, Sunni, Syrians, Palestinians, Israelis) came to a stop, with (overall and partial) winners and losers. Of course Syrians, Israelis after all, part of Muslims (in the order Sunnis, Shiites and Druze) won. Losers were: Christians (less than they assert), Palestinians, and certainly Lebanon, miserable failure of a pluralistic nation.

In practice, sixteen years of civil war were "useful" to balance power between Muslims and Christians inside, to confine Palestinians in ghettos, to allow Syria and Israel to continue to fight each other indirectly, by deleting the sovereignty of Lebanon. All this without even scratching the two aspects that remain the "original sins" of Lebanon: the political sectarianism and race to personal interests.

"Here is Lebanon offered body and soul to its favorite devil, liberalism, and its favorite vice, business": they are words of a French writer, Claude Riviere, in the introduction of a guide

published about Lebanon when Beirut was a worldly shining city and the country was called "Middle East Switzerland".

A small miracle of wealthy peace in the midst of the violence of the most conflict-ridden area in the world. Its secret? The majority presence of Maronite Christians (the only case among all Arab countries), which expressed a educated and dynamic middle class, simply surprisingly able in business. Lebanon was created around them and for them, descendants of the hermit followers of St. Maroun, who took refuge on Mount Lebanon in the fourth century, followed closely by a variety of religious minorities who went on to form a confessional mosaic.

Maronite Christians have always been the target community in that province of Roman empire, able to survive all forms of domination, by accepting Arabization and riding the wave of Islam, getting to the first line in the historical moment of independence, obtained by French in 1941. An artificial nation, created by European diplomacy, like all other states in the Middle East (Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Palestine). Lebanese Republic had the illusion to create the perfect balance by sharing public office according to the different communities. The president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the speaker of parliament a Shiite Muslim. The Maronite Christians guaranteed the leadership, legitimized as the largest community at the time: more seats in parliament, more jobs in the army and administration, the constitutional position with more power (Lebanon was a presidential republic).

The games were over, the squaring of the circle seemed to work like a charm, Lebanese could devote themselves to the national sport, the business. And if in thirty years Muslims had become the majority, never mind: the last census was done in 1932! And who really mattered all Arab-Israeli wars, given that business was booming, oil magnates were to enjoy Beirut, to enrich the Casino in the company of the great financiers of the time (including bankrupts)? No one. No one has ever mattered to try to remove that constitutional aberration that is the confessional representation, no one has ever mattered to try to build a true democracy, a state with an independent policy, with national dignity.

No, Christians played being Americans, Muslims (especially those who did not benefit from the economic miracle) continued to hear the "Call of the Wild" of pan-Arabism: the former looked at Nixon, the other at Nasser, first of all preoccupied of their private, very private interest. No, "Middle East Switzerland" could not last so long, with these assumptions.

Palestinians thought to blow up the detonator, inevitably. They began to arrive en masse, as annoying as every reminder of the fact, after the "Six-Day War" of 1967. Israel occupied what remained of their lands (Gaza and West Bank). They became more numerous (and stronger) after King Hussein of Jordan had repressed them, in the blood (the "Black September" 1971), causing another massive migration. It was historically inevitable that Palestinians crossed Lebanon frontier, Arab nation and now a Muslim majority nation. Also that Israelis continued to fight. And it is clear that they were a cumbersome presence, especially for the only Arabs who did not pay a minimum toll in four wars against Israel (Lebanese). Ugly, dirty and nasty, Palestinians threatened to become a state within a state. To chase them away, or at least make them harmless, Maronite Christians armed themselves to form the "Phalanx", the militias who started to do the job that Lebanese army would not or could not do. The fuse of the civil war it was triggered off.

Here is who is the source of all Lebanese misfortune, here who ruined the "Middle East Switzerland": Palestinians.

It is almost impossible to find a Lebanese Christian who does not explain this way the civil war. More precisely: Palestinians were the disease in the region, Lebanon was the victim sacrificed by international diplomacy. A diplomacy that has the clever face of Henry Kissinger icy expression. Jew Kissinger, secretary of State, for the ordinary man of Lebanon (and others), always treated Israel's interests more than those of the United States.

According to his plan (historical reality or political fantasy?), the infamous "Kissinger plan", Lebanon was to become the new Palestinian home; Christians were to migrate en masse to Canada in French-speaking Quebec.

This interpretation has its own logic, and some truth, but it is biased because it removes the evil that

lurks in the heart of Lebanon, projecting outside.

So, if yesterday Lebanon, happy island, was the victim of a global conspiracy (there are also those who blame Egypt, which wanted to destroy Lebanon's trade to enhance Suez Canal), today all evil comes from Syria.

"The reconciliation of the nation is already a reality, at the level of the people - says Boutros Sfeir, Patriarch of the Maronite Church – It is the political class, completely directed by Damascus, which does not allow the development of Lebanon. Democracy is distorted, the parliament does not represent the will of the people”.

"If you give voice to people, everything will adjust”, in essence the patriarch claims, who sees no need for a great spiritual effort.

Once again, the truth is halved. It is the attitude of the entire Maronite Church, without exception (at least at the top). They do not even realize that they talk exactly like politicians, using a harsh tone, always and only talking about sovereignty, power, property.

"Before the war, the land belonged to Christians for four fifths (85 percent), and today we are probably 49 percent, the rest is in the hands of Muslims": father Saadi Nemer, general superior of Marian order is in charge of relations with Islam, but he has no confidence in the followers of the Koran. Like him (and worse), Bishop Rai, one of the most regarded bishops in Lebanon: "Islam is not a religion: it is a political system. A Muslim will never accept to be ruled by a Christian, you will know soon in Europe".

The spiritual leaders of the nation think that way, those who think "national reconciliation is already a fact, at the level of people". They are not even aware of the charge of distrust and resentment they communicate. The zenith of contempt can be reached by involving Palestinian issue. Father Nemer goes so far as to argue that "Palestinians are rich because they are financed by Arab countries and are supported by international organizations, they live quietly and do nothing". Perhaps he has never dreamed of looking after relations with Muslims out of the beautiful rooms of his religious houses. If he had a stroll in Sabra and Chatila, he could not speak in this way.

Sabra and Chatila. Names intended to evoke the brutality of man for a long time, such as Gorazde, Srebrenica, Acteal, Hebron, Soweto. In the current reality, two ghettos in Beirut suburbs, a series of muddy alleys among blocks of flats that still bear the scars of bombs and open garbage dumps. Beggar humanity torn between distrust and hospitality, guns in their pockets and cups coffee as a spontaneous welcome. In the memory, the massacre of Sabra and Chatila, September 16, 1982. Under the direction of Israeli army, which occupied West Beirut, the Christian Phalanx killed mercilessly Palestinian elders, women, and children. The man who drove the executioners, Elie Hobeika, now is the minister for water resources. Miracles of "national reconciliation". "Here in Sabra and Chatila you can only survive. International organizations (especially UNICEF and Norwegian government) take care of basic necessities. But the tragedy is that we can not work". Abu Nadir rules the local community. Palestinians are the third generation born and raised in refugee camps and in the dormitory. Nobody believes in peace with Israel, they feel abandoned by everyone.

"The four million Palestinians outside the autonomous territories have no rights. Law prohibits to practice 53 professions. After Oslo agreements became 73. There are only hard and dangerous jobs, always without declaring their earnings. I think Gypsies have more rights than us".

No future, no opportunities. Schools (other than the primary ones) have unattainable costs, the university are a mirage (and in Beirut there is the prestigious American University). Better not to get sick: health care is almost completely private, not paying people do not have access to the excellent Lebanese clinics, and they may even die of poverty, as happened to Hazizi Heyou, a Palestinian woman. It is clear that money does not have nationality or religion, so this situation also applies to all poor Lebanese and immigrants.

"The state does not exist or exist a bit - explains Cesare Fritelli, director of the Italian Institute for Foreign Trade in Beirut - Sure, if I think of what was Beirut three years ago, no telephones, no electricity The progress was remarkable, however, characterized by 'first we make infrastructures, then we will think of the social issue'. But in Lebanon there has always been very

little "social issue"... "

You do not need an economist to explain Lebanese capitalism. Just look around. Beirut and all over Lebanon seem designed by the worst building speculator. A growing concrete jungle, which continues to attack the little green still there. The few very beautiful intact areas, archaeological areas, rather seem postcards out of context. No public phones, everybody (or almost) has a mobile phone. Try to find the main post office: a resigned and virtually hidden office (Lebanese posts were recently privatized and entrusted to a Canadian company).

But the apotheosis of free enterprise is reached in the streets of Beirut: a single, huge traffic jam that starts from Jounieh, where is the Casino, and gets to the airport. Lebanon has the highest ratio in the world in cars, residents and area (according to Lebanese weekly journal "Monday Morning"): 1,300,000 vehicles for a population of three and a half million inhabitants on a territory of only ten thousand kilometers square. An orgy of carbon dioxide and decibels, an interminable line of cars with powerful engines, as gasoline costs 500 lira per liter.

At night the showy neon lights of the many clubs attempt to return a joy that is not there. The need to escape is palpable, foreign flags are everywhere, used for the World Cup and never stored. A lifeguard in Biblos comes to claim that Lebanese are not Arabs, because they are descendants of the Phoenicians. According to popular tradition, Jesus Christ himself was Lebanese. It seems to be certain that until he arrived in Canaan, forgotten town in the security zone, where Israelis caused more than a hundred death (all of them civilians, UN staff) in the air raid of March 1996. Canaan and the miracle of the wedding, the water turned into wine. It seems to be even more incredible, seeing the UN destroyed building, the photos of dead people, the plastic of the supermarket, the disconcerting emptiness of consumerism. A miracle never happens outside the hearts of men. And today in Lebanon there is no place for faith, but only for religion.

Cesare Sangalli

Dori Chamoun speaks, the last leader of Christians

Wireless Puppet

Outside the "official" political game, the president of the National Liberal Party tackles the hypocrisy of a country that has not yet come to terms with the past. "There are more Christians killed by other Christians than by any other faction".

His father, Camille Chamoun, was president of the republic in the fifties. The brother Dani, groomed for a brilliant political career, was killed in 1990 by Samir Geagea, commander of the Lebanese Forces (wing of the Maronite Christian "Phalanx"). Dori Chamoun, 66, a law degree, entrepreneur at first and political leader then, is surely a piece of Lebanon history.

A history of fierce rivalry, political struggles always bordering in gang war, incredible compromises. Chamoun is one of the few Christian leaders have seemingly no skeletons in the closet, the only one that continues his activities at home (General Aun in exile in Paris, Raymond Eddé of National Block is abroad and "does politics by mail"): he is not part of the Parliament, which he considers the sounding-board of Assad's decisions, but he continues his stubborn battle as "off limits" politician.

What is your opinion about Taif agreement that ended the civil war?

R-"Taif agreements were a big bluff. A farce, result of international cover to allow Syrian annexation of Lebanon. They wanted to call an arsonist (Assad, author's note) to put out the fire. It was all planned, the Gulf War against Saddam was useful for the reorganization of the Middle East, including Lebanon. "

You argues that Lebanese Christians have lost the war. But in autumn 1990 in Beirut different factions of the Maronite confronted each other...

R - "It is true. But the game was led from the outside. It was enough to appeal to various leaders' personal ambition, promising them all and put them against each other, a tactic that worked perfectly. I believe however, that the law was on General Aoun's side, he commanded Lebanese army and for this reason he needs a support. My brother Dani tried in vain to reach an agreement and they gunned him down".

Many people believe that the author of your brother's murder is not Geagea and that the process was a fabrication concocted by Syrians. What is your opinion?

R - "I do not have enough elements to express an opinion. However, so far the contrary has not been proved. If he was not Geagea in person, however, I think they were men of his group".

How did the Maronite church work during the conflict among Christians?

R-"The leadership of the Maronite church was surely closer to Geagea than to the general Aoun. The patriarch himself was a friend of Geagea. They saw him as the great defender of Christians, the holy savior. Aoun was head of a national not sectarian army, which also had Muslims in it. Geagea used the cross as a symbol, he was as the champion of Christianity. But he and others, like Elie Hobeika (the butcher of Sabra and Chatila, author's note) were only those former young people who had a gun and had entered the Phalanx.

So the Maronite Christians' responsibility are huge ...

R-"This is something that was removed, a truth which Lebanese are still to face. Suffice it to say that there are many more Christians killed by other Christians than by other religious factions. The Druze themselves chased Christians away from their areas only after those idiots of Lebanese Forces came to do the bosses where everyone had always lived in mutual respect. Not by coincidence in my home town, where today I am mayor, Der el Qamar (Chouf region, where the headquarter of Druze leader Jumblatt is, author's note) there have never been problems. The fact is that when it is about power, the Maronite Christians are ready for everything".

What has changed in Lebanon in recent years?

R-"Nothing. People live hand to mouth, more or less as the days of the war. There is no feeling of moral reconstruction, no vital impulse. Church members are all politicized, there is no one that has a little spiritual depth. We are a country under Syrian occupation and in the process of Syrianization. If we go on like this, one of these days the National Assembly will vote, to an almost unanimous majority, the union with Syria. It will be the end of what was, despite many limitations, the only Western-style democracy in Arab world".