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Nishan Havandjian

California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo, nhavandj@calpoly.edu

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DEBUNKING SOME MIDDLE EAST MYTHS

Nishan Havandjian

Returning to Lebanon after thirty years of absence carries in itself some trepidation. I had a seven-month sabbatical leave to teach journalism and English at Haigazian University, my alma mater. There I first got a taste of journalism when an American instructor from Westminister, California, encouraged me to become the editor of the school newspaper. After all these years, I was coming back from California to teach a new generation about journalism and English usage in a region increasingly prone to turmoil.

When friends and relatives first heard about my plans, they exclaimed: “You’ll be back in less than a week.” There were fears about the lack of law and order and possible terrorism. Don’t visit here, don’t visit there, don’t go out at night, they intoned. Not for a minute did I feel uneasy whether in Lebanon or in Syria. I walked everywhere and never worried about safety. I tried to blend in as much as possible but was hardly successful in dissimulating an Americanized accent while speaking Arabic.

Thirty years have not dented the astounding beauty of the country, with its posh summer resorts and waterfalls at every corner. Nor have they tamed the Lebanese habit of ignoring all international traffic laws. “Only foreigners stop at red lights,” I was repeatedly told. Cars are parked routinely on sidewalks and crossing a street requires a double check on the coverage of that life insurance policy. Thirty years have not dimmed Lebanese hospitality and warmth either. When the Lebanese invite you to their homes, they become culinary peacocks fretting over your health and sustenance.

To be sure, two decades of civil war have left their imprint on the country. Hundreds of mortar shell-damaged buildings still stand, reminding visitors of a senseless fratricidal war. One such symbol is the Holiday Inn with its shell bearing the scars of the bomb-

ings. Not too far off an unfinished Hilton stands, still waiting for better times to resume construction. Yet, the Crowne Plaza and the Beirut Intercontinental are doing brisk business with their renovated facades and steady stream of Mercedes and BMWs waiting to unload their riders.

At least one third of the population has emigrated, many of them business owners and professionals now in Glendale, Pasadena and Orange County. As a matter of fact, Southern California now boasts newspapers in Arabic and Armenian with English supplements which target Lebanese émigrés.

However, countless thousands perished in tit for tat revenge killings, and most Americans packed and left over a couple of decades ago. Even today, American tourists are a relative rarity, unless they are Lebanese returning to visit the motherland. While some Americans have felt increasingly uncomfortable visiting the Middle East, Arabs from the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia now crowd Beirut's streets with their American SUVs. They, too, have learned that in the post 9/11 world, it is better to visit a brotherly Arab country than risk the hassles of getting a visa for Europe or the United States.

Yet love for American culture and its way of life has permeated Lebanese society. While thirty years ago, French language and pop culture were all the rage, now the trappings of Americana rule this Mediterranean seaport. Barely leaving the ultra-modern international airport, the ubiquitous billboard signs beckon and remind that you're only a stone's throw away from your favorite fast food hangout. There is a Burger King, several Pizza Huts, a Domino's (which delivers in less than thirty minutes), a KFC, a half a dozen Dunkin Donut locations which also serve gourmet food in addition to the regular staple, two Starbucks in the most stylish neighborhoods where throngs linger until the wee hours at their sidewalk tables eating brownies and cheese cake and puffing away at American and French cigarettes. A Cinnabon and Seattle's Best rub shoulders by a Cineplex where Fahrenheit 9/11 did a brisk business for a couple of months. Then there is a McDonald's across from the American University of Beirut. Viewed by some local groups as an outpost of unwanted American culture, the location suffered damage when a bomb exploded there a couple of years ago. Now it is guarded round-the-clock by a couple of machine gun-wielding paratroopers. Tour guides still call the chain: "The American Embassy."

Symbols of America are everywhere. From scantily clad young women chatting away in English at the Virgin Megastore, to the latest Hollywood movies released within a week of their American debut. All around town stores bear signs of affinity for everything American. There is the us Shoes store where the merchandise is from Italy, the American Dream Bar with its aperitifs and beer from Europe, and the Miss America Amusement Arcade, a magnet for male teens. In supermarkets, which are four-story emporiums, American food is everywhere. From Velveeta, to Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice, made in

Belgium please. The latest craze is Diet Cherry 7 Up. "We just got it," said a breathless store manager. "It's good isn't it? That's why we are selling it at this high price" (about 75 cents to the can).

In neighboring Syria, American culture is less pervasive, but the increasing appetite for it is evident. CD stores sell bootlegged us songs. A couple of years ago, American movies took several years to make their appearance on Syrian screens. Now new releases are seen a couple of months later from their us opening. *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *International Herald Tribune* can be bought in Syria. In Aleppo, Syria's second city, there is a Santa Barbara, California store selling expensive European watches. Mike's Tavern promises genuine Coke bottled in Saudi Arabia and not the local version called "Cop Cola." The owner confided that he tried to get an In-And-Out-Burger franchise, but couldn't. Yet occasionally you do see signs of "Bush the Murderer" in Syria and in Lebanon, which is mostly a symptom of frustration with the current us administration's "Now we are interested in the Palestinian issue, now we are not" attitude.

While the world media are breathlessly announcing to the world that the Lebanese have discovered freedom and refuse to be intimidated any more, intrepidity has always been a Lebanese trait. Even last summer, from cab drivers, to housewives to students, the criticism of the government was scathing. This is attested by the almost dozen dailies in Arabic, French, English and Armenian that dot the Beirut media scene.

The Lebanese and Syrians are probably two of the most media-connected citizens in the world. In terms of political sophistication they play second fiddle to very few nations. And for good cause. For a mere \$10 a month you get to share a satellite dish and access four all-news channels in Arabic beaming from different countries: the BBC, CNN International, CNBC Europe broadcasts in English and Arabic, two French all-news channels, as well as channels from Turkey, Spain, Italy, Greece, and India. And let's not forget *National Geographic* and *Animal Planet* either. They can watch just about every conceivable American program from Oprah, to Jerry Springer, to Dave, Conan and Jay, and *60 Minutes*, too. The Lebanese can also view American televangelists via the TBN channel. There is also a homegrown 24-hour Christian channel in Arabic. Next door in Syria, satellite ownership is the norm. Their world is wider than the Lebanese, since they see programming from Malaysia to Kurdistan, to China to Morocco. Their only barrier is linguistic. Nothing stands in their way of information gathering and consuming.

Then there were the students.

I knew English was either their second, third, fourth or fifth language. I expected they would be a bit undisciplined. Yes, they were also on the crafty side when it came to excuses for late papers. Not as much as dead grandmas, but more exotic tall tales like: "I had to be a midwife for my sister. She has nobody else." Or: "I have Mediterranean Fever and they are treating me with new drugs." And consider this: "I have chronic migraine

and it won't go away until about 1:00P.M. That's why I've been absent from your morning classes." During breaks for long morning labs, students disappeared to have breakfast and would not show up for half an hour. Only threats of an F grade brought them back quickly.

But nothing prepared me for their bonhomie and wicked sense of humor. When asked to write essays about child labor, these kids had social consciousness to spare. Instead of writing the required fifteen lines, they doubled it. Their American counterparts are no match when it comes to world politics. Most students here are familiar with the latest twists and turns in American politics and most are highly critical of what they see as misguided policies. There is a certain admiration among many of them for Hezbollah whom they view as an organization struggling for an independent Palestine but also a party, that runs a slew of highly organized social services, including hospitals and schools. By all indications it is currently the strongest party in Lebanon.

There is a certain dignity about the Lebanese students. They won't perform for you. They won't pander. They have respect and admiration for their instructors and put them on a pedestal. Many volunteered on a daily basis to carry my books for me. They wanted to learn more about American slang, and were delighted to hear such words as "hand-me-downs" or "belly up." I put them on the beat system and they covered crime, education, and accidents; they also showed surprising maturity and dogged determination to get their story. Yet beneath this amiable demeanor, there existed a certain undercurrent of sadness and desperation. The average salary for a graduate with a BA is about \$500 a month and Beirut is very expensive, on par with most American cities. Many students asked me for advice about immigrating to the United States. They know they have political freedom and world media access, but America is still El Dorado. 🍷