



'The Lebanese Have No More Tears'

A memorable evocation of Beirut's agony is spoiled by anti-Israeli bias.

DANIEL PIPES

Anyone who has not lived in Lebanon since its civil war began in April 1975, and that is most of us, must find an incident like this baffling:

At the beach the other day, crowds of people had been swimming and sunbathing when suddenly Abou Abdou (a huge cannon) started [firing]. By now, of course, everyone was quite used to it, except for one young woman who immediately leaped up, gathered her

things, and ran for cover. She looked back ... and saw with visible amazement that no one else had moved. The sunbathers were still lying on their deck chairs and towels, and the swimmers continued to frolic in the water. She stood staring, transfixed for a few minutes by the collective indifference, and then slowly returned to her chair, reapplied her suntan oil, and lay down in the sun.

How can this be? How can

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and *Islam: The Genesis of a Military System* (Yale University Press, 1981); *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* (Basic Books, 1983); *An Arabist's Guide to Egyptian Colloquial* (Foreign Service Institute, 1983); *The Long Shadow: Culture and Politics in the Middle East* (Transaction Books, 1989); and *Friendly Tyrants: An American Dilemma* (St. Martin's, 1990).





brutal warfare and beachcombing coexist in adjacent streets?

Daily life

Jean Said Makdisi, a full-time resident of the Lebanese capital throughout the civil war, attempts to explain such mysteries of middle-class life in Beirut. She does so with vignettes. We learn,

for example, of a better Beirut restaurant where the chef's *pièce de résistance* is no longer chateaubriand but *shwarma*, a fast-food sandwich made of mutton; and of a bookstore where the items in the window reflect the ideology of whatever group happens to control the quarter of town, but the back-room stock remains unchanged.

We learn from Makdisi the

therapeutic value of housework, the bonding of victims prompted by aerial bombardments, and the black humor of the bomb shelter. She explains how the war has caused the Lebanese never to tell another person, not even a husband, where to go, when to go, or how to go: "Never take the slightest responsibility for another's fate. It is impossible to anticipate which road or room or even chair is to be the fatal one."

Makdisi writes vividly, and at times her evocation of daily life offers real insight. Here she describes the special fear promoted by a civil war:

It is easy here in Beirut to look at every passing stranger and see the face of a potential murderer. Those throat-cutters, those who rose in the dark of night, who put their pitiless hands around the necks of women and infants and cut them, who are they? Which ones? Yet it is when I look at my own face in the mirror that I am most frightened. Is mine the face of one of the damned?

Or consider this explanation of how nearly all machines broke down in Beirut during the terrible summer of 1982: "Modernity and technology were now exclusively represented in the weapons; every other aspect of life was reduced to primitive, forgotten habits. The death machines worked; hardly anything else did."

Still, Makdisi's best efforts leave much unexplained. Life in Beirut remains elusive. Why, for example, is she seemingly never prepared for trouble? Every crisis comes out of the blue, every round of shelling is a shock. She writes in May 1989—after fourteen years of war—of going so quickly down to the shelter of their building that "none of us had even time to think of bringing flashlight or pillows."

This is odd, but a much larger mystery is why Makdisi and all those who have the means to get away choose to stay in Beirut. Nearly all of her family live abroad, and they beg her again and again to leave the country. But some perverse instinct prevents her from doing so. When old friends return briefly to Beirut and together they encounter gunfire on the street, the expatriates naturally ask her, "Look, why don't you get out of here?" Makdisi recalls her response as sullen and uncommunicative; she and the friends then parted, politely but coolly, each put off by the others' behavior. The friends' question, asked by others here and there in the book, is never really answered, perhaps because the author knows Beirut better than she knows herself.

Even when out of the country, Makdisi succumbs to the same mysterious urge to be at home. Ironically, she can be away when the shelling subsides but must go back when things

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get bloody. She was on holiday in England when the news came in September 1982 of Bashir Gemayel's assassination. Sensing trouble, her first response was to wonder how to get back home: "Were the roads open? Could one get from Damascus to Beirut?"

All this makes little sense. The closest Makdisi comes to an explanation is the fear of losing one's apartment. But why? Lebanese professionals by the thousands have remade their lives in the Persian Gulf, Europe, America, Australia, and elsewhere. How can some partially destroyed real estate keep a couple with two young children from moving to a peaceful place?

An element of compulsion seems to drive those Lebanese like Makdisi who have stuck it out this far; they feel a certain conceit in having survived. Years of challenges and a pride in one's own toughness imbue Jean Said Makdisi with an impulse to endure all. But the reader cannot be blamed for growing impatient with the author's perverse relish for the horrors of Beirut life. This unnatural devotion being voluntary on her part, she seems more foolish than brave, which has the effect of diminishing her narrative.

But the real weakness of *Beirut Fragments* has to do with Makdisi's political analysis of Lebanon's travails, which is shallow and biased. Two problems stand out: her readiness to absolve the

Lebanese of all responsibility and her unfair treatment of Israel.

Makdisi waxes lyrical on the innocence of her countrymen. "In spite of all that has happened," she writes, "in spite of the viciousness and cruelty, the vast majority of the people reject the religious divisions that have spread like a terrible cancer." Youths may do the bulk of the actual killing on the streets of Lebanon; but in Makdisi's eyes they retain a purity all their own. Here she discusses her students at Beirut University College:

Christians and Muslims of all sects enjoy each other's company without a qualm or a thought of confessional issues. Indeed, when they do mention these issues at all, they joke about them. I feel a little as though, in making this observation, I am betraying their steady refusal to be drawn into the divisions.

Blaming foreigners

But if the Lebanese themselves are so touchingly humane, so unaffected by religious hatred, why has their country been consumed by fifteen years of civil war and communal strife? The answer for Makdisi, as for nearly all Lebanese, is simple: The foreigner is responsible. Sometimes she fingers the great powers. For example, she holds "regional and

world powers" responsible for permitting the militias to bomb civilians, even when this achieves no strategic gains. She is particularly caustic about governments that profess to champion humane values, seeing this as no more than "hypocritical affectations."

At other times, Makdisi portrays arms merchants as the ultimate source of Lebanon's problems. "We are the guinea pigs on whom new weapons are being tried out and obsolete ones used up lest they go to waste. ... The factories must be kept busy, I suppose." On occasion, Makdisi's accusations against arms dealers become frighteningly demagogic:

Every roar, whistle, and crash translates itself in my mind to the sound of a cash register, the tinkle of champagne glasses, and the hum of conversation at a very expensive restaurant somewhere. ... The screams of a terrified, burning child become the laughter of those who reap the gains of this havoc.

This, it should hardly need pointing out, is the sheerest nonsense. Lebanese began the civil war and they keep it going. The outside world is no angel, to be sure, and one foreign power after another has attempted to manipulate the country's many factions. (As an Arabic expression has it, when clouds gather in the Arab world, it rains in Beirut.) But for-

eigners have not caused the carnage. Blaming foreigners is the easy way out; and this crutch also partly explains why the Lebanese people never address the root causes of their civil war. By repeating these glib accusations, Makdisi does her part to keep the Lebanese from confronting reality.

The most perturbing aspect of *Beirut Fragments*, however, is Makdisi's unjust treatment of Israel. To begin with, her language is biased. Other soldiers fight, Israeli soldiers "murder." Lebanese forces do not cooperate with Israel but are "in collusion" with it. Israel is an "unshackled aggressor." Even more egregious are her accusations of Israeli genocide; what perverse motive causes observers so often to accuse Jews of the very crime they above all have suffered from?

Explanations are biased, too. Makdisi ascribes the Arab-Israeli conflict, at base, to "Jewish exclusiveness"—a genteel way of phrasing the old anti-Semitic canard. Facts are biased. While authoritative sources estimate all civilian dead from the 1982 war at between four and five thousand, Makdisi writes loosely of "several tens of thousands dead."

Then there is Makdisi's special treatment of Israeli troops at war. All other combatants in the Lebanese civil war turn up in *Beirut Fragments* in an impressionistic and faceless way. Facts about them are simply absent; the many foreign ar-

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mies that fought in Lebanon (especially the Syrian and Iranian) never appear in the book. Here is a typical account of a non-Israeli barrage on Beirut: "Two nights ago there was a nightmarish return to the vicious shelling. Tens of shells whizzed by, crashing down a few hundred meters away." Note the anonymity; the shells just come from the sky.

In contrast, here is an account of an Israeli barrage: "It

was as though the Israelis had gone stark, raving mad; as though they had achieved a paroxysm of violent hatred; a lunatic, destructive urge to kill, to blot out every living thing, to leave nothing standing, to eradicate the city." The Israelis have faces; they are named.

Even when the Israelis do not actually hurt anyone, they spur Makdisi to fits of outrage. One might think, for example,

that she would be grateful that the Israeli air force often did no more than engage in mock air raids on Beirut, with the fighter planes making noise without dropping bombs. But no: "If it was possible for the Israelis to inspire further hatred, they did it with this device." One might think she would take some satisfaction in the Kahane Commission, which was established to investigate the Sabra and Shatila massacre and which caused Ariel Sharon to forfeit his position as minister of defense. But no: Makdisi despises this commission as a "bogus moral victory."

Most dismaying of all is the author's suspension of her usual placidity when she discusses Israel. She tries to forgive all those who shot at her, no matter what pandemonium and tragedy they cause—except the Israelis. "Out of the muddy waters of the last seven years [1975–1981] had emerged the true evil: Israel had presented itself thus at last, in open, undisguised, unpardonable ferocity." Nor is Makdisi shy about recording her emotions toward Israel, regardless of how virulent these may be. Here are her feelings in August 1982: "For the first time in my life I knew pure, naked hate. At that moment, I think I could have killed. At that moment, I understood murder and war and the black heart of revenge." This from a woman who otherwise feels only compassion and the agony of the victim? What is going on here? Why this

obsessive invective against Israel?

The best answer is not a pleasant one: Makdisi appears to have a covert political agenda, that of blackening Israel's name in the United States. The fact that she claims to see the Lebanese war as a part of "the Palestine question" confirms this hunch. So do the bouquets she throws the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In a peculiar bit of interpretation, for example, she attributes the cosmopolitanism of Beirut to the PLO, writing that "the presence of the PLO had been a major factor in keeping Beirut's window open to the world and to the currents of modern history." The PLO—which did so much to destroy that window—has been accused of many things, but never of being a fountainhead of intellectual sophistication.

Does Makdisi succeed at her shabby task of discrediting Israel? In a way, yes, for the calumny is part of the background to a quite different story, and so may be imbibed by some. At the same time, her venom exacts a heavy price. Iniquitous treatment of the Middle East's only real democracy spoils what could have been a gentle and admirable book. Not only does Makdisi's purveying her own "pure, naked hate" as a thing of virtue debase *Beirut Fragments*, but it reveals that she too is trapped by the furies of Middle Eastern politics. ■

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