Unlearning in Beirut

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In *Innocents Abroad* (1869), Mark Twain ridiculed his American traveling companions' habit of seeing the Holy Land through a preconceived lens. He concluded that "if I wish to profit from this tour and come to a correct understanding of the matters of interest connected with it, I must studiously and faithfully unlearn a great many things I have somehow absorbed concerning Palestine" (Twain 1869, 486). Although I came to the Arab region with knowledge of its realities, I too have had a great many things to unlearn and to learn. It is certainly possible to improve one's grasp of the Arab region from a distance, but, in my case, is has been direct encounters with Arab individuals and groups that have led me to question my own assumptions and consider new possibilities.

I arrived in Beirut with my partner Betsy in 2004 to become the first director of the Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) (Figure 1). Later, I served as dean of AUB's Faculty of Arts and Sciences (2009-16). This essay outlines some of what I have unlearned and learned through direct encounters with individuals and groups in the Arab region.

Authentic Arab?

One spring day in 2007, Betsy and I were exploring the least-visited of the passes through Mount Lebanon. We stopped to see an early iron-age smelting and forging site to which some archaeologists had alerted us. There were pieces of slag all over the ground and ancient building stones had been re-appropriated for animal pens. Nestled under a grove of gigantic walnut trees, sat an old man on a wooden stump, surrounded by goats. He invited us to sit with him and talk, so we did. The shepherd seemed not to understand what we were doing in Lebanon; I remembered that I had a business card with me and handed it to him explaining that I was an AUB professor. His clothes were encrusted with dirt, and his long hair and beard were grizzled and tangled. I remember thinking at the time that, unlike so many Arabs I had met, this one might be recognizable to many Americans because he fits common expectations of Arabs—or others from the global South. Is the Arab who seems most distant from the forces of global integration the "authentic" Arab?

The Arab World Geographer / Le Géographe du monde arabe Vol 19, no 3-4 (2016) 248-260

I received a definitive answer the very next day when the shepherd showed up at the Main Gate of AUB in central Beirut asking to meet me. I invited him to my office and asked my administrative assistant to join us. I was surprised to see that he had cut his hair and beard and put on a clean shirt. After talking for a few minutes, and drinking some coffee, he pulled my administrative assistant aside and whispered that he had a plot of land to sell in the mountains and suggested that she and he could exact a high price from this foreigner (me) and that they could split the profits. Far from living passively in some pre-modern realm without history, this shepherd was market savvy. He saw me as a target, a means for his own ends. The first thing to point out, of course, is that markets are not new in the Eastern Mediterranean: they are at least 4 500 years old. The important point, however, is that the trend toward global integration that has rendered borders porous to flows of finance, goods, information, and sometimes people, means that almost no-one has been left untouched. Like everyone else, Arabs are trying to understand these influences and to develop culturally-appropriate and effective responses. Arab intellectuals have been in conversation about this for many decades (for a summary, see Kassab 2009). The shepherd from Mount Lebanon was, in his own way, trying to negotiate his place in a fluid and confounding world of transnational flows.

Mark Twain realized that what prevented him from grasping the reality of Palestine was not so much his lack of knowledge as its surfeit. Progress in understanding required discarding his current conceptions and struggling to construct new ones that better matched the realities he was confronting. Twain, like the authors of the essays in this special issue, was provoked by direct experience to "unlearn a great many things." In the twenty-first century, what clouds our perception of the Arab region is, first, the ongoing power of orientalist thinking which renders Arabs as backward, irrational, and exotic. It is interesting that the most powerful critique of orientalist thinking came from Edward Said, an exile in New York whose critical edge was not softened by that location or his deep engagement with it. The contemporary dimensions of orientalism have been augmented by Samuel Huntington's theory of "the clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1993). When presenting undergraduates with a survey of the world, geographers often employ a regional scheme that partitions the globe into broad cultural realms. We are careful to stress that these realms are constructs, but, for Huntington, these cultural areas have essential differences that are incompatible. Geographers are also acutely aware of connections, networks and flows that reveal the permeability and variability of these purportedly insulated realms. Moreover, we are equally aware of their internal diversity. Both orientalism and Huntington's thesis rely not only on the assumed insulation but also the

assumed internal homogeneity of "the Orient." In what follows, I report on some direct encounters with Arabs that, for me, challenged both of these contentions. I begin with the question of internal diversity; despite my studies, nothing prepared me for the actual diversity I found in Lebanon.

Arab Diversity and Arab Commonality

On his flight to visit me in Beirut, my brother from New Jersey had his first encounter with an Arab man from Lebanon. Perhaps because this man recognized my brother as an American, he chose to reveal that he had recently fathered a girl whom he had named Golda, and that he had indeed named her after former Israeli prime minster Golda Meier. The man explained that he had been a member of the South Lebanon Army, the Israeli-supported military force that collaborated with the Israeli army during Israel's long occupation of Lebanon which ended in 2000. This particular aspect of Arab diversity was as surprising to me as it was to my brother. The breadth of the Arab political spectrum rarely comes to the attention of Americans. While teaching American studies courses at AUB in the years following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, I was struck that a considerable minority of my students cheered that invasion. During the first part of Lebanon's long Civil War (1975-90), Christian groups, which had dominated Lebanese politics since the county's independence from French colonization, were generally aligned against Moslem groups and Palestinian refugees. Some of these Christian groups actively collaborated with Israel and received weapons from them. The dynamics among Lebanon's confessional groups—Shi'ites, Sunnis, Druzes, Marionites, Orthodox, Armenians, to name only the largest of eighteen official groups—are constantly shifting. This sort of complexity is the result of Arab agency operating over time within a shifting field of internal and external forces.

In Huntington's thesis, the Islamic faith is part of the cultural core that makes Arabs and Westerners wholly incompatible. Yet Moslems believe that all three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—address themselves to the same God. In fact, religion can be a source of Arab commonality, not only because of the common patriarchal tradition, but also because of the great esteem with which the Virgin Mary is held among many Christians and Moslems. When my mother, then in her late 80s, visited Lebanon a few years ago, I took her to a number of sites connected to Mary's historical presence. One of these is the early Christian site of Qana—the place where, according to the Roman historian Eusebius, Jesus performed his first miracle. As the story is narrated by the evangelist John (2:3), while attending a wedding, Mary

whispered to her son: "they have no wine." Although the town of Qana is today overwhelmingly Shi'ite, the site is preserved and respected.[1]

Another biblical site is the shrine to Our Lady of Montara (Our Lady of Waiting) on a hill overlooking the City of Sidon. The Gospel of Mark (7:24-31) mentions the visit of Jesus to Sidon, when his mother reportedly stayed in a cave on the hilltop to avoid the contamination of a pagan city. Today the site in the Village of Maghdouché is marked not only by the cave glowing with votive candles (Figure 2) but also by an Orthodox cathedral and a towering statue of Our Lady of Montara. A Moslem woman who has lived in Sidon her entire life told me that she, and many of her Moslem friends, often visit Maghdouché to light candles in honor of the Virgin.

Perhaps the most renowned of sites dedicated to the mother of Jesus is marked by a colossal statue that sits atop a tower on a high mountain overlooking the Bay of Jounieh just north of Beirut (Figure 3). The site is known as Harissa and the statue represents Our Lady of Lebanon[2] Pope John Paul II visited Harissa and celebrated mass there in 1997. At all of these sites, but particularly at Harissa, my mother was struck by the presence of Moslems. While climbing the spiral staircase toward the giant figure of Mary, she talked with a large party of Iranian Shi'ite pilgrims who had come all the way to Lebanon to visit the site. It was certainly not what she or I expected.

What I leaned from these experiences is that religion could not only be a source of commonality among Arabs, but also has the potential to play a similar role between Arabs and non-Arabs, particularly Christians, a role that would further undercut the region's purported separateness.[3]

Hospitality

A few weeks after the conclusion of the 2006 Summer War, I drove with some friends through southern Lebanon. The roads were punctuated by large and small craters. Bad roads are common in Lebanon, but the effects of recent Israeli bombing made them particularly hazardous. As we neared the border city of Bint Jebail, our car struck one of these craters, severely bending the wheel rim and flattening the tire. Within a minute of pulling to the side of the road, a car stopped behind us, then another, and finally a truck. Almost before we could get out of the car, three men inserted a large jack under the car and began to lift the damaged wheel off of the ground. They insisted on doing this for us and refused to accept any compensation. Our spare tire was also flat, but the men brought out a pump, inflated the spare tire, and installed it. Then they told us to drive into Bint Jebail and find a service station to repair the

tire. As we hobbled into Bint Jebail, we were shocked to find that it had been almost completely flattened by the intense Israeli bombing (Figure 4). This was one of the sites where Hezbollah fighters had surprised the Israeli army by holding ground and successfully destroying a number of its tanks. We found a service station and explained our situation. The mechanic pounded the rim back into shape and reinstalled the tire. When we attempted to pay for this service, he simply replied: "No charge." He knew we were Americans; he knew that the United States had resupplied Israel during the conflict, and he knew that Condoleeza Rice had refused to pursue a UN-backed effort to halt the hostilities since, as she put it, Lebanon's suffering was simply the "birth pangs of the New Middle East" (Rice 2006). Travelling in Lebanon and other Arab countries, our frequent car troubles always elicited similar responses. When we blew a water pump in one mountain village, people not only helped with repairs, they also brought out trays of fruit, figs, dates, and nuts, and invited us into their homes. The categorical nature of Arab hospitality is distinctive. Social psychologists have traditionally classified Arab societies as inherently collectivist in contrast to the more individualist orientation of Western societies. AUB professor Charles Harb and his social psychology collaborators have effectively argued against this simplification, partly on the basis of the value that Arabs place on hospitality (Fischer et al 2005). It is essentially a universalistic orientation: hospitality is due not simply to members of one's family, tribe, or coreligionists—but to all humans. The historical origins of this practice may be related to potential reciprocity, but to experience this kind of hospitality as a stranger—to be recognized as fully human and as a subject of concern—is to experience the exact opposite of a cultural clash.

One of the most remarkable examples of this commitment is the hospitality afforded to war refugees. Syria accepted about two million Iraqi refugees during the long conflict that followed the U.S. invasion. Jordan and Lebanon, in turn, have accommodated a prodigious tide of refugees from the Syrian conflict. Lebanon, for example, has absorbed approximately 1.5 million Syrians, the vast majority simply blending into Lebanese cities and villages. For a country of only four million, this would be the equivalent of the U.S. absorbing over 100 million Mexicans. Although there have been tensions and costs, this example of Arab hospitality makes the European and North American acceptance of Syrian refugees pale in comparison.

Being American

While Betsy and I were visiting Yemen in 2007, I was confronted by a young man in a central square of the nation's capital, Sanaa (Figure 5).

He grabbed me by my jacket and shouted: "George Bush! George Bush! George Bush!" Immediately, three of his companions pulled him away and apologized profusely. I certainly was recognizable as a westerner. The man seemed to assume I was American and apparently wanted someone to blame for what the U.S. president had unleashed in the Middle East. What is remarkable to me about this experience is that, in twelve years, living in Beirut and travelling widely throughout the Arab region, and despite the clear anger concerning U.S. policies and actions, this was the only time that anger was directed at me as a U.S. national. Of course, I was aware that this had not always been the case: Lebanon in the 1980s, for example, became very dangerous for Americans. Two years later, we were traveling in Egypt, and, after our Cairene taxi driver discovered we were Americans, he began to complain about U.S. foreign policies. I asked him: "Why is more anger not directed at Americans like us who live in the region?" Just then we happened to be driving by President Mubarak's palace. Scores of military guards lined the front of the palace. The driver asked, "You know why those guards are necessary? To protect us from him!" He then concluded: "If you don't blame me for Mubarak, I won't blame you for Bush." Such encounters indicate that for most ordinary Arabs, there is nothing inevitable about the current tensions between Arabs and Americans: they are the result of decisions about which there is disagreement. Their own political experience has prepared them to grasp the difference between leaders and government, on the one hand, and ordinary citizens and their social and cultural practices on the other. The uprisings of 2011 allowed Arabs to glimpse the new political possibilities of a post-authoritarian order. Despite the repression and turmoil that now prevail in most Arab countries, those glimpsed prospects continue to abide as possibilities. To dismiss such possibilities is to render the region static and its people without agency. Yet, time and again, I have seen non-Arabs make the assumption that what has happened in the past, is bound to occur again.

A few days into the 2006 summer war, when Israeli bombing had induced hundreds of thousands of people from southern Lebanon to flee to Beirut, AUB's provost began meeting individually with non-Lebanese employees who had not yet fled the country. He informed Betsy and I that Beirut would soon be flooded with relatively poor Shi'ites from southern Lebanon and Beirut's own southern suburbs that this was bound to lead to conflict between these refugees and Beirut's other groups; the refugees, he warned us, will certainly be angry at the U.S., at AUB, and at any Americans who are still in the city. He advised us to leave immediately. For a number of reasons, Betsy and I made the decision not to leave. The provost was right about the influx of refugees from the south. But Beirut's encounters with the newcomers, and our own, was nothing like we had

been led to expect. Instead, a spirit of solidarity and defiance prevailed. Even Christian churches and schools were turned into shelters. AUB's hospital became packed with the wounded, and the university opened its campus and dormitories to hundreds of families of its employees from the southern suburbs (Figure 6). Everyone became involved in relief work, such as packing and delivering basic supplies to the refugees. The city became a remarkably fluid zone. In all of our encounters, we never once felt anger directed at us, or even at AUB. These Arab groups were not inevitably destined to repeat events of the Lebanese Civil War: their actions were based on their own choices.

An American living in the Arab region is constantly reminded of the transnational flows in and out of the region, and the particularly significant connections to the United States. I have met several Arab women born in the 1970s who were named Lara after Julie Christie's character in the Hollywood film *Dr. Zhivago*. I have met several born in the 1980s named after Nancy Reagan. Like so much of the world, the Arab region is awash in American popular culture. Basketball, introduced through the American University of Beirut, is Lebanon's most popular sport. Even before the internet, English was already the fastest-growing language in the region.

And because Arabs consider American higher education the gold standard, dozens of new universities have followed the example of American University of Beirut—the oldest Western-style university in the region—and inserted the word "American" in their names.[4] Being "American" in the Arab region is often not what it seems. While it is true that some Arabs demonize Americans, most do not have the luxury to be so simplistic. Their complex engagements with America, as a force and a symbol, are often opportunistic—the asymmetry of the situation demands this. Moreover, since America is already a powerful presence in the region—not only militarily, politically, and economically, but also culturally—it would be exceedingly difficult for Arabs to engineer a clash with an entity with which they are already complexly interwoven.

Vulnerable Bodies

I will close by describing an encounter that—more than any other—has helped me to cope with the tensions of my voluntary exile. Unlike many of the other authors whose essays are included in this special issue, I am not primarily a Middle East expert. Although I am interested in the transnational engagements between the U.S. and the Middle East, I do not use networks of local informants as some of the others do. Once I became dean in 2009, I increasingly found myself in the presence of elites whose words were often guarded and predictable. Moreover, when a

dean enters a room of non-elites, the power dynamics can make honesty difficult. What I needed was a more naked encounter to counteract these stifling and scripted ones. I found it in the company of a small group of Beirutis who love to swim in the sea.

Nearly every morning, year-round, a group of mostly elderly men, and at least one woman, climb over the railing the separates Beirut's seaside walkway from the rocky shore (Figure 7). Their activity is not part of the global fitness culture. Rather, it stems from an old and complex relationship with the Mediterranean that includes trading, fishing, deep diving to monitor traps, and swimming for pleasure. Shortly after arriving in Lebanon, I began to join them in the mornings and at other times. Betsy would occasionally join me. Several of the men warmly welcomed me, and when Betsy did not come, one man always asked: "Wein madam?" (where is your wife?). These people knew I had something to do with AUB, but our relationship had nothing to do with that. It was about the water. The rocky shore of the Mediterranean at Beirut can be very dangerous. The members of this group are acutely aware of human frailty in the face of the sea's power. There is a constant discussion of the risks of swimming. One morning, I ventured out between the rocks but, after swimming for a while, I found the waves too large for me to easily return to shore. My companions spotted my dilemma and linked hands to create a human chain that led me to safety. The woman swimmer I mentioned had lost her husband to the sea about twenty years earlier. He had been fishing from a coastal rock amid stormy seas. His body was found later in Turkey. She is determined to go into that same sea every day, to look it in the eye, and to feel the joy of immersion. The sea is complex, a source of both life and death. We swimmers feel that we are continually negotiating this ongoing relationship. We speak of the various sea creatures we encounter, in particular, the sea turtles that are very common near Beirut. One day I was talking with the woman about the turtles she had seen that day. She remarked: "I don't swim with the turtles; they swim with me." What this group of most elderly Arabs helped me to realize is that we all belong here; the sea belongs to all of us. We belong in the sea as much as the turtles. Our near-nakedness strips away the social roles we play in the city. We are vulnerable, equal, and in need of cunning and cooperation. We find common cause in the fact that we can embrace the experience of giving over one's vulnerable body to something vast and powerful, and find this experience liberating, transporting, invigorating, and also leveling. As Judith Butler (2004) has suggested, our common precariousness may provide a basis for broader human commonality.

Notes

1 Qana is also the site of two more recent massacres that are memorialized in the landscape—the 1996 slaughter of over 100 refugees by the Israeli Air Force and the 2006 bombing of an apartment building, again by the Israeli Air Force, that left 28 dead, most of whom were children. This gives visitors two more reasons to come to Qana; see Asser, 2006.

2 Most often referred to in French (one of Lebanon's two official languages) as Notre Dame du Liban.

3 In 2010, a special commission of Moslem and Christian leaders met to recommend a new national holiday to celebrate inter-religious understanding in Lebanon. They chose the Feast of the Assumption, which Christians have long marked on March 25—exactly nine months prior to Christmas Day (Mouawad, 2010).

4 A partial list would include the American University of Sharjah, the American University of Kuwait, the American University in Cairo, the American University in Dubai, the Lebanese American University, the American Intercontinental University (Dubai), the American University of Science and Technology (Lebanon), Lebanese American University, American Middle East University (Jordan), Arab American University (Palestine/West Bank); in addition, the U.S. State Department website lists 21 primary-secondary schools in the MENA with the word "American" in their name (http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/c1701.htm).

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FIGURE 1
The author and his partner in front of Martyr's Monument that sits in the very center of Beirut's Martyr's Square. Photo by a stranger with author's camera, 2005

FIGURE 2
Cave at Maghdouché dedicated to Our Lady of Montara (Our Lady of Waiting) where Mary reportedly stayed while Jesus visited Sidon. Photo by author, 2004

FIGURE 3
Our Lady of Lebanon Shrine at Harissa attracts Moslem and well as Christian visitors.
Photo by author, 2005

FIGURE 4
Results of 2006 Israeli bombing in Bint Jebail. Photo by author, 2007

FIGURE 5
Market square in Sanaa, Yemen; the site of the author's verbal confrontation. Photo by author, 2007

FIGURE 6
Young refugees from Beirut's southern suburbs on the AUB campus during the 2006 Summer War. Photo by author, 2006

FIGURE 7
The Mediterranean Coast at Beirut. Photo by author, 2007