

لبنان فوضى

LEBANON'S FAWDA

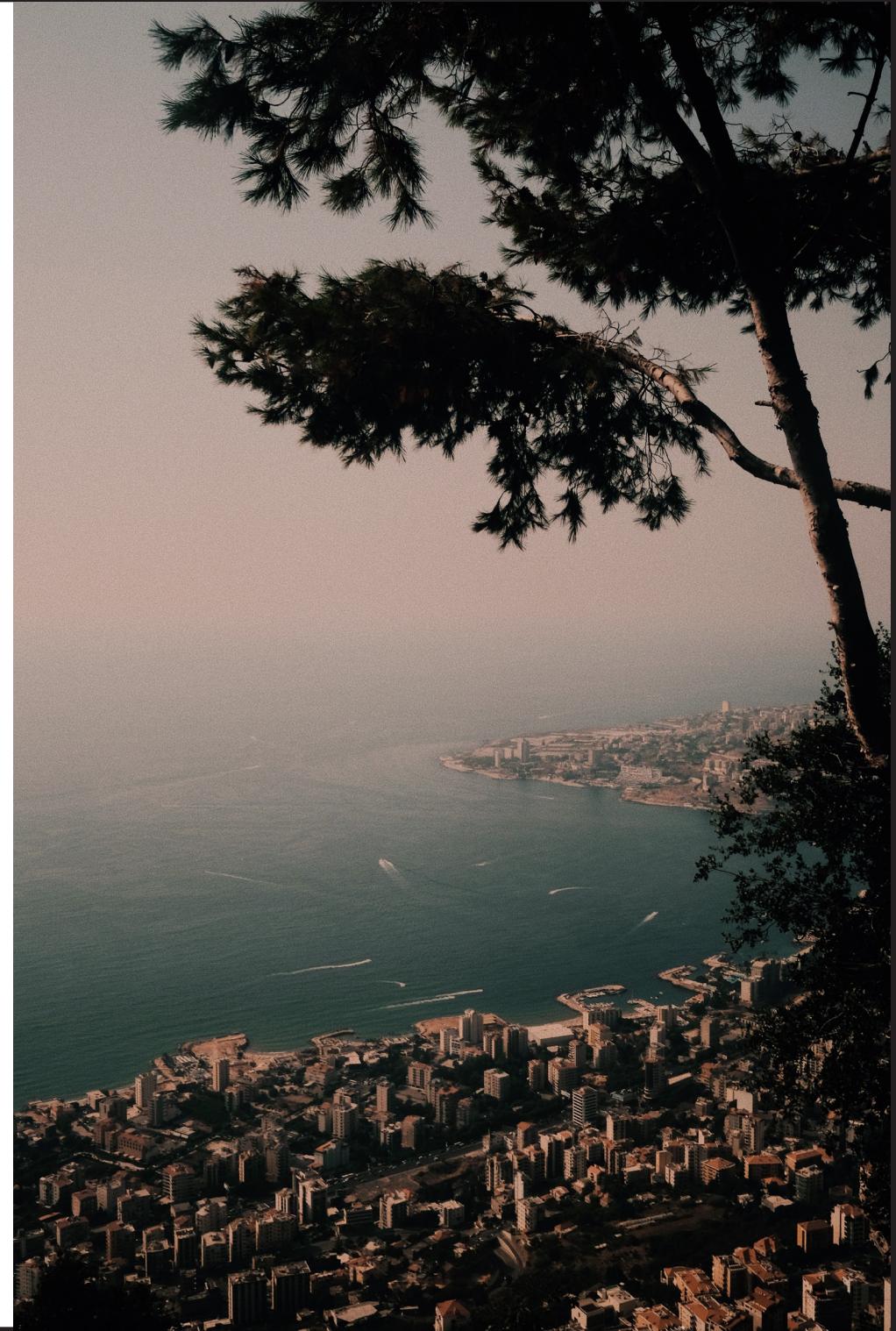


The Lebanese pride themselves in the beauty of their country. Split between the Mediterranean and the Mountain range of Lebanon, the view is breathtaking from every direction. Filled with history dating back to the Phoenicians and Persians, even present day Lebanon tells the story from more than 5,000 years ago. This rich history is full of extended periods of turmoil with significant external influence to add to the complexity of its very unique social and religious breakup, which had an exceptional impact on the political and economic stability of the country.

Lebanon went through a devastating civil war between 1975-1991, which was fueled by religion in a country that had a very complex religious mix of Christians and Muslims of different sects. The presence of Palistinaian refugees had also added to the complexity of this civil war and extended it beyond imagination. When the war ended in 1991, the major concession to ending the war and bringing peace to the country was to agree between the fighting factions to breakup the government to represent the various religious and sect breakup of the country. This was meant to make sure that every religion and sect was appropriately represented in the government.

Since then, the Lebanese government has been made up by the various religious and related sects because they believe that is the best way to preserve peace, whereby the heads of power represent their own sect and are generally split according to the majority. The role of the president would be held by a Christian Maronite, the prime minister would be a Muslim Sunni, and the house speaker a Muslim Shiaa.

One of the most visible outcomes of Lebanon's unstable history is the loss of its highly educated population to external immigration in search for better education and better job opportunities. In recent years, this phenomenon has become even more serious as the economic and political situation became even more unstable. As a result, the level of unemployment, poverty, poor infrastructure, and a deteriorating education system has worsened and led to high levels of poverty and continuous discontent with the government's performance of running the country. Many Lebanese are having an internal battle deciding between the love of their country and the failure of the government.





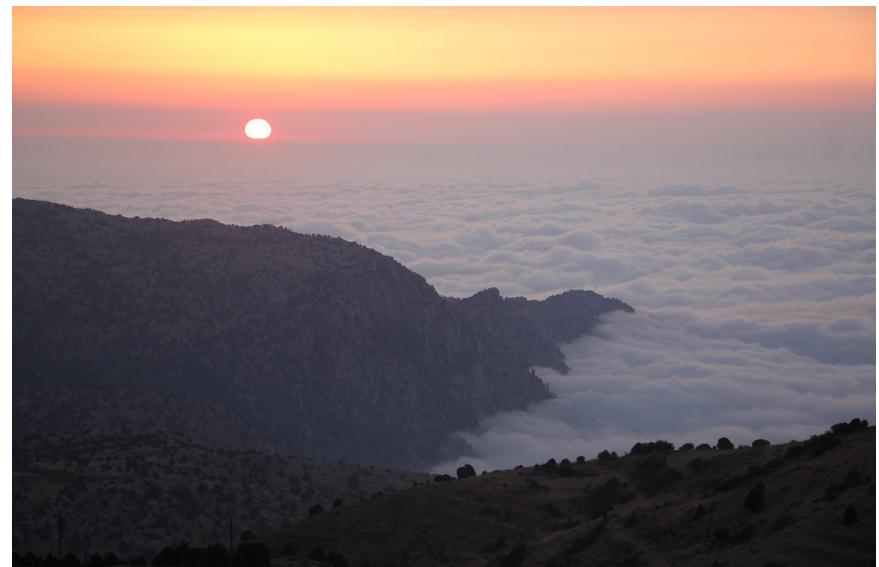
Renovations for Downtown Beirut finished in 1998 after the civil war. This photo is before it was wrecked during the October 2019 uprising.



This is a deserted train station in Tripoli. It symbolizes how state assets in Lebanon were deserted after the civil war ended. Today, it is just another memory.



The capital Beirut is visible from a helicopter view, with the famous tourist attraction Raouche located right off the Beirut shore.



The mountain range of Lebanon towers high above the city during sunset. Even the chaotic city isn't visible from here.

Today, Lebanon is one of the most indebted countries in the world with debt levels reaching more than 150% of its current gross domestic product. Throughout the years since the end of the civil war there has been a systematic corruption program led by the same political leaders, but particularly exacerbated in the last 4 years where the level of economic deterioration led by corruption has reached every level of the country including its once very stable financial system. Their corrupt behaviour that cascades down to every level of the government has drained the country's resources and led to heavy indebtedness that has now reached alarming levels. This corrupt system operates as a mafia style organized crime whereby the only beneficiaries are the political parties ruled by the same militias' leaders at the expense of the Lebanese people.

On October 17 the Lebanese revolted, demanding a change in the political system, to remove the current political leaders, and to eradicate corruption. Protesters took over the country by closing roads, town squares, schools, banks and major government offices. Consequently, the Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, resigned on October 29, 2019 after nearly two weeks of protests. "I have reached a dead end, and we need a big shock to counter this crisis," he said. "My call to all the Lebanese is to prioritize the interest of Lebanon, the safety of Lebanon, the protection of civil peace, and the prevention of economic collapse before everything else."



The Lebanese people reached a point of no return for them to start their own "Arab Spring" to bring change and start building for the betterment of their country.

Many of the protests were peaceful and the Lebanese people started posting about them all over social media. There were more than 17,000 posts just on the hashtag "lebanonprotests". Social media brought the Lebanese people together, unlike how the government was able to separate them based on their religion. Social media was used to communicate and connect. The symbol of the revolution is the fist, as shown in the picture, it was covered by many media sources around the world.

However, this symbol of the revolution was intentionally burned down by the government supporters who were infiltrating the demonstrations and terrorizing the demonstrators to scare them away and to suspend their demonstration against the government.

Only exacerbating the growing problems was the August 4th port explosion. Thousands of tons of ammonium nitrate, kerosene, hydrochloric acid, and fifteen tons of fireworks were all stored in hangar 12. The explosion caused major damage to most of the city with 200 deaths, more than 5,000 injured, and tens of thousands displaced. The explosion demonstrated how the government was already failing the people, the aftermath led to an even worse crisis.

To add more fuel to the fire, Covid-19 was starting to test the health-care system and the economy. On top of everything that the country was going through, students were expected to start school in September and the country was in chaos. With the worsening economic, financial, political, environmental, social, and security conditions of the country the future for the country became totally unknown in the absence of a united government that can be tasked with major reforms and eradication of corruption.



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Beirut, Lebanon

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Enraged over a massive blast in Beirut last week, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of the capital on Saturday to call for accountability and the downfall of the country's ruling class. A large number of protesters threw stones and other projectiles. They faced tear gas, rubber bullets, and birdshot fired from shotguns.

The head of the UN food agency said



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Tarek Hilal has been at the forefront of Lebanese business for 30 years. His discontent towards his own country started long before the civil war even ended.

Houda Tabbal: I understand that you left Lebanon during the peak of the civil war to finish high school and university. Do you mind sharing your experiences from that time in your life?

Tarek Hilal: Not at all. I didn't leave in the peak of the civil war, I left in the beginning of the civil war in April of 1975. I was seven years old. I left with my family to London and I went to boarding school. Which was very difficult at the time because I was quite young to leave my family, my country, my parents, my relatives, and my friends. I went to boarding school which was very difficult at the beginning but it was great at the end when I got used to the school and made a lot of friends. It was even more difficult when my parents decided to take us back to Beirut almost four or five years later. Things were getting better in Lebanon and supposedly the war was over and we were going to go back home and start our lives back again. It was even more difficult to leave London at the time because I had already built a lot of friends and nice life there.

So you went back to Beirut after five years?

I went back to Beirut almost five years after we were in London, yes. Little did we know that Lebanon was a mess and it will always be a mess. Two or three years later we had a huge invasion of our neighbor in the south, Israel invaded Lebanon, I was in Beirut at the time. I was at school and we were at the end of the year during our sports ceremony, waiting in the amphitheatre in the open air when bullets started falling over our heads. My friend next to me, sitting two seats away from me, had a bullet in his shoulder. I saw it going into his shoulder and the blood pouring out. We started scrambling out of the school, running into nearby buildings to cover our heads from the falling bullets because Israel was invading and started bombing Beirut. This was it. Then we somehow, god knows I don't really remember, I got home. Then the invasion of Israel to Lebanon started at that time and then we had to leave again, this time through Syria. So we had to go to Tripoli, which was safer than Beirut, then we went to Syria and from Syria back to London where our house was. We stayed there until the invasion was over.

One more time after the invasion was over, supposedly Lebanon was going to be better again so my parents decided to take us back to Beirut to finish our schools.

One year later after we got back and school started and everything was supposedly going back to normal there was another civil war, another episode of the long civil war which one more time forced me to leave the country. This time to Tripoli from Beirut again because it was safer than by boat from Tripoli to Cyprus, which is ten hours by boat. Then I had to fly on my own from Cyprus, I was 15 or 16 years old at the time, to fly to my Uncle and Aunt's house in New Jersey. I stayed there for a while then I went to Cleveland where my sister was living with her husband, who was in medical school. After that I flew to California where my brother was a freshman in university and that's where I continued my education. So I was always following my education.

Looking back now, do you regret the decision your parents made of going back and forth from London to Lebanon and then to the U.S.?

Yes and no. No because this connection with family you can only get when you're there. So the social family connection that we have and which we all benefit is from being connected to the country and to the family. On a professional level, yes absolutely. Because in your professional life you need stability, which you will never get in Lebanon.

What took you back and what was it like seeing it for the first time after the war had actually ended?

After the war supposedly ended, it still hasn't but, another episode of our supposition that the war ended in 1992. It was a mess because I went from living almost over 10 years in California back to Beirut, which had no roads at the time, no electricity, no social services. Basically it was a post war destroyed city. At the same time, There was great hope in the country because the war ended and stability was internally supported but also from neighboring countries and Europe and the US. This support was a major drive to rebuild the country and regain the status that Lebanon always had pre-civil war.



Houda Tabbal: Did you also have hope in the country during that time?

Tarek Hilal: I had hope before I started to realize it's hopeless. When I started working and communicating and understanding the mentality of the people, which was in the society and that's early on, I realized it's a hopeless place to rebuild.

Even though you had established yourself in another country, you still went back. Do you ever regret your decision going back?

On the personal level no. Because on a personal level my father was my role model and I had always dreamed to work with my father. So that was the main reason I went back.

Lebanon experienced a short period of peace and stability, but once again there is a great deal of instability. Do you think this was inevitable?

Lebanon will never have stability. It is socially corrupt, politically corrupt, and culturally corrupt when it comes to managing a country.

Why are you so negative?

I'm not negative, I'm just realistic. Because I work with the people, I work in society, I've experienced the society, and the mentalities. On all levels, in all religions, in all sects, in all social levels and the problem with Lebanon is its people not the country. It's worse when you have a society that has grown during the war, during the time of complete collapse and instability. That society is very, very hard to handle and to restructure.

A major part of young Lebanese remain hopeful that Lebanon would eventually emerge out of this crisis, and therefore provide them with an opportunity to live and work in Lebanon. Do you think these are false hopes?



I hate to admit it but yes. I support their hope, but I don't believe it's realistic. It is much easier if you have not experienced the country to be hopeful than those who have experienced it, because they don't know any better.

In October 2019, there were the protests that were mostly guided through social media and completely shut down Lebanon. Do you think that these made a difference at all?

It has not made a significant difference for change. Unfortunately, I don't think there is any change that can happen in Lebanon. To what we dream of, to what we'd like to have. See Lebanon is a cultural problem more than anything else. The culture is correlated with politics, correlated with society, correlated with the religions. It's a mess. So it's not a straightforward 1+1=2, you know, we put this government and this government has the power over the entire country. It doesn't work like this. In order for Lebanon to be well, there has to be major change. So the setup of the country, as it stands today, cannot survive. It never did and it never will. The political structure of the country is not solid.

Recently, you and your family decided to leave Lebanon. Do you think your story with Lebanon has ended?

Never, it will never end. As long as you have friends and family, and in our case business, it is very difficult to leave and disconnect completely. On a personal level, I would love to be able to do it, but the reality is that I can't really do it. However, I have taken the decision to try and disconnect as much as possible, close whatever I can back home. For me I'd rather not look back.



Heather M. O'Brien fell in love with Lebanon's chaos. Four years later, she's back in the United States. The chaos became too much.

Heather M. O'Brien: Yeah, so I studied in New York at the International Center of Photography. And then I moved to California to get my master's in photography and media. And I was teaching in Southern California and applying for work. And I've always had a deep interest in the Middle East. I was born in the U.S., but my father was always very, very vocal about his politics. He is very left wing, you know, progressive person. And growing up, I heard a lot about Palestine and we talked a lot about this issue. He's definitely pro Palestinian. So when I was applying for work, I saw a position that had come up in Beirut at AUB [American University of Beirut]. They were specifically looking for someone to teach photography and to teach how to build a dark room, which is, you know, my experience as an analogue photographer, and filmmaking. So I thought it could be an interesting moment to apply. I had also just finished a book project that was kind of looking at photography and kind of a post 9/11 image landscape, you know, working with artists and activists both from the Middle East and the U.S. So I was already kind of somewhat familiar with some of the region. And so I thought, why not apply, you know, when you're on the job search? And they asked me for an interview. So I flew to Beirut and immediately, like the second I fell off the plane and it was like I was in love with the place. Like, I don't know if you have this experience with Lebanon, but it's like a very intoxicating place. It's sort of like I always joke with my friends. It's kind of like a drug because it's so chaotic and it's so intense. But it's also so beautiful, like the people, the food, the landscape, the sea, the mountains. And it's just like I immediately felt something, you know, I don't know how to get it other than like it was very visceral. I really loved the campus, I love the students, and the people I met. And so I decided to take the job and move there. And my partner at the time, you know, he also moved with me. And so we got there in 2016. I always joke with people like it was the year of the election, you know, of Trump. So, I feel very lucky. I got to be there during the four years of madness.

Houda Tabbal: I mean, I think that Lebanon is equal parts, beauty and chaos. I don't think it would be Lebanon without both. But like when I think of Lebanon, I think of the chaos of the people on the streets and like, you know, you go and like it's kind of like in Tripoli, I think of the old like souk where my grandfather works and it's just like chaos. But there's so much history there that I think it's beautiful. And I've seen your work on your website, and I think it beautifully captures that aspect of Lebanon. But do you think the way that Lebanon is portrayed on the news is an accurate representation of what it's like there?

No, no, not at all. I think part of my work when I got there was, you know, the first year I was there, I really couldn't even pick up a camera. I was very kind of paralyzed because I was just sort of getting used to everything. And I had a lot of strong feelings and ethics around issues of representation and especially growing up, you know, with this very anti Middle East rhetoric, under the Bush administration and even somewhat under Clinton and under George Bush senior, this idea of, you know, how Kuwait and Iraq and Afghanistan and even Beirut. I was born in 83 so I think my parents, of course, were very nervous for me to go to Lebanon because they had this vision of the civil war, because so many Americans do. And admittedly, even I had a bit of a fear, you know, but I think part of my work there was to kind of undo a lot of that and undo a lot of that media representation. I made a very clear choice to show specific kinds of imagery from Beirut, especially towards my family and friends, and the work that I did make when I was there.

And I'm still thinking about it. It's very specifically not to demonize or overly show the violent parts of the place, because I think we see this so, so much, you know, and I think that's personally for me why the explosion on August 4th was so traumatic, because I felt like I was. I was there to kind of prove everyone wrong, you know, to say, no, Lebanon is not what you think it is, right? It's like yes, it has chaos. And, yes, it has histories of war and violence. But like, there's this other side to it. And then I felt like when the explosion happened, it was sort of like a lot of my friends and family who were skeptical about it. Oh, see, we told you so. You shouldn't have gone, you know. Yeah, just the sentiment that was really unsettling, I guess you could say. But yeah, to go back to your question, I definitely don't think the representation that the media portrays is accurate at all.

You touched on how old your mission was to show your family and your friends back home that like it's not what you see on the news. Do you think that after spending how many four years there you achieved that?

I mean, I think I did up until October 17. You know, when the uprising started, it's kind of crazy because I was actually in the U.S. in October of 2019. I flew back to Lebanon on October 17, 2019. So I flew into Rafik Hariri Airport. If you know the airport, then you know there's a lot of traffic. I was like, yeah, you know, there's always something happening at the checkpoint. So there was all this traffic and we were kind of just stuck there. But I didn't think anything of it because when you're there, you're like, OK, it's just another checkpoint. We have to wait. Traffic was like just whatever. And then we started hearing all the cab drivers, yelling and screaming and kind of felt a little bit of tension, heard things on the radio and and no one really knew what was going on. And finally, we got out of the airport and we drove down the highway into Hamra. And I'm looking to my right. And I just see all of these guys running with tires, you know, like holding their tires. What is that? And then all of a sudden they jump in front of the car and they start lighting them on fire.



Heather M. O'Brien: We were in the front like we were right there. And people were screaming and people were crying. There was a car next to a house full of children. So the guy got out and was talking to the guys with the fires, we finally got through. Then on the drive home, it was just like fire after fire after fire, all the trash cans. Since that day, that was just the norm, I guess these protests and then the banks closed and we lost all of our savings because as I told you, we were paid in Lira, the banks were closed.

The uprising started. I feel like up until that point, I was able to kind of convey that this was a very different place than the news. But then, of course, once October 17th started for good reason. Right. I mean, the government there and the politics, that's a whole other conversation. But then afterwards, they had a very deep effect on me and my students and, you know, then I became pregnant. So I was, you know, it kind of started to get really crazy even before covid hit, you know? So I feel like up until that point of October 17th, I was able to sort of show a different side to friends and family. But then, you know, once the news media started to as you know, they captured the uprising and the Thawra, like it just changed. You know, everyone was like, oh, you have to come back. You can't live there. It's too dangerous.

I spoke to one gentleman in particular who basically said that there's no redemption for Lebanon. It never recovered after the civil war. Essentially saying that it's hopeless. He lived there after the Civil War and he only moved to Dubai last year. Do you think that there's no hope for Lebanon?

Yeah, I mean, I don't agree with that. I can see the point of, you know that there's a lot of arguments that after the civil war that Lebanon never actually recovered and that the violence with things like Solidere and these rebuilding efforts were actually more detrimental to the country.

I can see that, you know, and I understand that for sure. But I think wherever people live, there's going to be hope. I mean, maybe that sounds naive, but that's not to say that I'm not against what the government is doing. I think that the government is very corrupt. And I think that there with, you know, you've seen this over and over again with how the government works with corruption, you know, privatization, corruption, the generators, the privatization of the water, you know, the infrastructures. But I think I know so many people who are still there who are doing good work and despite everything, despite them losing all of their money and their homes, you know, barely being able to afford food every week on top of it, you know, like all of this I mean, sometimes when people in the U.S. complain about covid, I get really upset. I'm like, well, what about let me try having covid on top of an economic collapse on top of like a political, you know, meltdown and no infrastructure, you know, problems with electricity and water and everything and the Syrian crisis and the Palestinians that live in Lebanon, etc. So all that is to say, I think that just people living there is hopeful. You know, just day to day getting by, getting through and resisting this corruption that the government has. You know, the government has done so. So, yeah, I think it's going to be a long, long haul. But I think, you know, I have hope that one day I can show my child, my son and the beauty of the place he was born, you know, and despite him being born on the day of the explosion, I can show him the mountains and I can show him the old souks and I can show him, you know, this is the country. And I guess I'm also someone who believes, like, out of struggle comes resistance.

OK. Yeah, It's like I would say that Beirut broke me. It also strengthened me, if that makes sense. You know, it also made me realize, like it's a place where you can thrive, but you have to really have a community there. You have to push, you have to fight against this corruption of the government.

I want to circle back to what you said about giving birth on the day of the port explosion. I watched your short piece, Let Everything Happen to You, Beauty and Terror. You described in the piece how you saw beauty when you looked up to the sky. I want to know what beauty you saw. And also, how would you describe your birth experience, given the extraordinary circumstance of the port explosion?

I mean, I think it's a really difficult thing because the explosion itself, the colors of it were quite extraordinary. I have never seen anything like this, you know. I mean, the reds, the pinks, the yellows and the way the sky, I mean, I was in the hospital the whole time, but still, like you look out the window and literally the whole sky was red. The only thing I can compare it to is I've been in California when there's been forest fires that are really, really intense. And it creates this really bizarre phenomenon where it feels like you're just living on an orange planet. This is kind of how it felt. I think that's something I struggle with in my work. I don't want to romanticize this explosion because it was horrific and many people died.



Mia Hilal's deep rooted connection with Lebanon hasn't changed since leaving Lebanon for the first time.

Houda Tabbal: What was it like for you growing up in Lebanon all your life?

Mia Hilal: Growing up in Lebanon, I love it. It's my home. To me there is no place I would rather grow up in than Lebanon. Even like, I wouldn't have wanted to move this year if it wasn't for the situation. I would have wanted to stay in university in Lebanon but due to the circumstances I had no choice.

Although you have grown up in a relatively peaceful time you have still endured a few traumatic experiences. How did these experiences impact you growing up in Lebanon?

So when I was small, in 2006, I experienced one war in Lebanon. I forgot exactly which one it was but I can remember exactly how we hid. How there was shooting right next to my house. How we went to the mountains. We tried to escape and it was really traumatizing but the most traumatizing event was the explosion that happened last year on August fourth. It was so, so traumatizing and till now it's a very sensitive topic to me and the Lebanese don't deserve this. I have really close friends that lost their homes, who lost their family members and it was really traumatizing.



Do you think because you're older and you can understand what's happening more, it was more traumatizing for you than when you were younger? Or do you think that your connection is stronger to the country now?

No, I think that as I grow up I understand the country more and I understand the corruption that is occurring in the country and I'm more aware that it's all political. Now for example, with the economic crisis I see my friends and family suffering, like as much as I love the country I wouldn't want to continue growing up there.

Do you think it was the best decision for you to go to university in Canada because of the situation?

Yeah, I think it was the best option because, I don't know, everyone on the streets is begging, like you can see the difference within a year how many people lost their homes and lost everything. People are not able to even eat, you can see people eating from the garbage, you've seen stuff that you've never seen before. It makes you so sad that it makes you want to get out of the country just to be able to help the country.

Do you feel guilty for being able to leave and leaving these people that you care about behind?

I think that me leaving the country is also like I can help the country. I don't feel guilty because even if I'm in the country or I'm out of the country I can still be able to help the country. Now in university I'm going to be volunteering in a club that helps Lebanon and raises money for Lebanon. I don't think it matters if I'm there or not but how much I can give and help it.

Even though you have made a decision to leave Lebanon do you still consider yourself engaged in the day to day politics and what's going on?

I'm always reading the daily news and what's happening. I know everything and I'm always updated with what's happening, I would not want to just ignore it.

So, I also spoke to your dad and he was saying that he has given up hope on the country. You were just saying that you're still hopeful Lebanon can recover. Do you think that there are more ways that your view on the country differs from the older generation? Is your hope false?

I think that they've experienced much more than us, so maybe they know a little more than us, but I still believe that things can change. Because now you can see that more Lebanese are actually realising and they are aware of what's happening and understanding what's happening. The Lebanese people are now uniting more instead of separating like how it used to be. So now as they unite I think that they are hopeful for the country because they've united in a way that they never have before.

Houda Tabbal: In October 2019, when the initial protests started, I was in New York and I saw it all over social media. Do you think that this was the first step in uniting the Lebanese people?

Mia Hilal: Yeah, I think it was. I was in Dubai at the time and the first day I was back I joined the protests. I saw something that I've never seen before. It was really nice how everyone is standing up for the country not politicians



When I spoke to your dad he said that the problem is not just political but it's also the people, it's social and the problem spreads through the whole country. Do you agree that the people are the problem in Lebanon?

Yeah, there are so many people in Lebanon who are brainwashed. They only follow a specific political party, but that's just part of the country. The other, okay maybe it's the majority, but I feel like more and more of this majority are beginning to stand up for the country itself and are turning against the politicians.

Do you think that the younger generation has a better understanding of how to help the country now, through social media and being able to spread the word? **Yeah, I believe that now the younger generation are not following what their parents are teaching them, they're learning from their friends in school and social media. They're learning about how to help the country instead of, for example, many people now (the younger generation) they follow a**

specific political party because of what their parents are teaching them. But now after the Lebanese revolution what the younger generation saw changed their perspective.

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ليس لدينا القدرة على العيش في بلدنا..

Picture by : @theobaf
@melissafreihah

6w

serena_semaan And we cannot afford to leave 😊

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theobaf That's why i left :/ too sad ! Thanks for using my shot anyway 🙏

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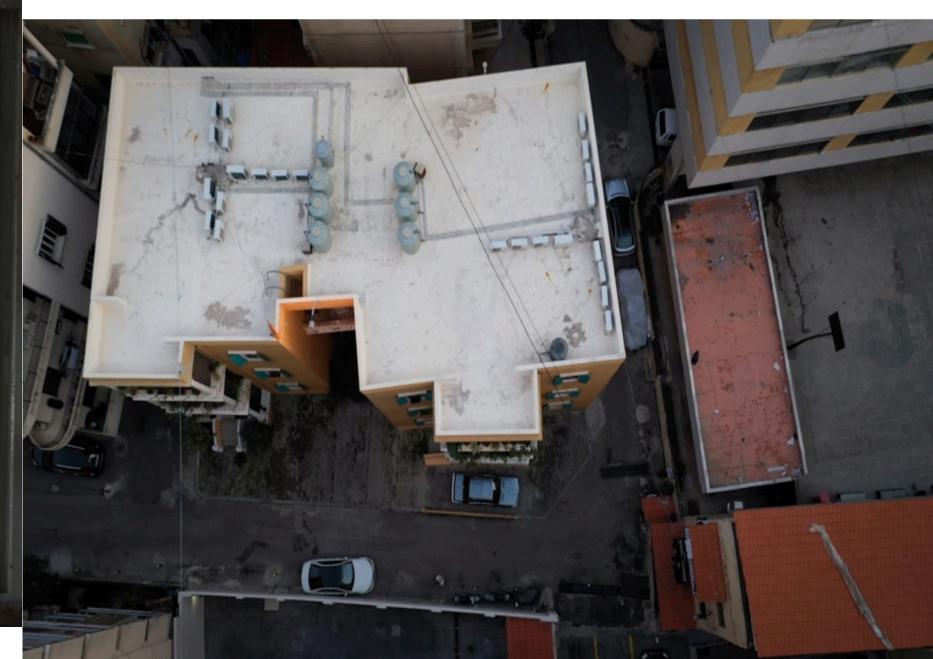
You said before that it doesn't matter whether you're in Lebanon or out of Lebanon, you still want to help and still think that you can help the people. Do you think that you will ever go back in the future to Lebanon to live there and to work there?

To work there I don't think so but it all depends on the situation and how things change. Of course I hope to go back and I hope for my kids to be raised the same way I was in Lebanon but in a more peaceful way, not in a war. I think that when you grow up in Lebanon it's different than growing up anywhere else. The connections and the friendships you make in Lebanon are completely different.



Each Lebanese has a different story, a reason why their feelings are valid. It doesn't matter who they are because in the end the Lebanese people are all suffering from corruption from within the government and within themselves. Everyone has dealt with the Lebanese crisis in their own way. Those who are able left the country, some stayed to fight for their rights, but then there are those who can't afford to put food on the table. In reality, the only Lebanese who aren't suffering are the corrupt leaders. They are the sole reason parents can't afford to put food on the table or can't send their children to school. How can the Lebanese be hopeful and optimistic when their money was stolen by the people who were supposed to protect them.

As a Lebanese myself I hope that one day the government will wake up, start rebuilding this country that so many people call home. There needs to be change on all levels. Lebanon needs to redeem its position as the Paris of the Middle East.



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nathneer.jpg Who would've thought worlds would turn around and the Lebanese people in its entirety would wake up one day to find out that the country's been taken hostage by the people themselves, that the Lebanese have finally woken up to stand up for their rights.

A full year later and I honestly have no words to describe how I feel. It's been a rollercoaster of pride, joy, heartbreak and endless tears. We've lived through many roadblocks, many heartbreaks, many protests, many lives wasted, many mothers whose hearts were shattered, many houses demolished and one layer of overlords and murderers who dare to call themselves leaders.

October 17th may just remain an anniversary of what sparked the rise of a nation, deep to me wishing, with all my heart, that we'd take the leap and fix the tacles, once and for all.

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