

In Beirut's Tent City

MOUSTAFA BAYOUMI

It is late March 2005, and I am in the Virgin Megastore in downtown Beirut. Across the street is the tent city that protesters against the Syrian presence in Lebanon pitched soon after the Valentine's Day assassination of Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister. A few steps away, the enormous Muhammad al-Amin mosque soars up. Hariri is buried there, and because it is less than forty days since his death, Quran reciters still sit outside underneath a canopy while men and women of every confession continue to pour in to pay their respects. Nothing has united the country more in recent years than his death.

Hariri was not without his critics, however. Often blamed for plunging the country into massive foreign debt, he was also said to have ignored the poor when he rebuilt Beirut after the civil war. For most of his political career Hariri backed the Syrians; but last year began moving cautiously towards the opposition. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad reportedly told him last August that, "if you and Chirac want me out of Lebanon, I will break Lebanon." The opposition, which is made up of Christian, Druze, and Sunni parties, has been organizing in earnest since last September, when under Syrian pressure parliament extended the term of Emile Lahoud's presidency by three years.

In visible opposition to the government, hundreds of young people, most under 25, are camping out in the tent city. They will not leave, they say, until Syria does. (And on 30 April, days after Syria withdrew its last troops from Lebanon, the tent city was dismantled and the campers were awarded medals in a ceremony hosted by the opposition and the camp's leadership.) The opposition movement depends heavily on these young people, an emergent political force in Lebanon drawn mostly from the middle classes. Somewhat aware of their past and tired of their present, the youth desperately want to forge their own future. Waheed and Hisham, two young men who see themselves as independents rather than part of the "official" opposition, are among them. Although both are Druze, they do not support Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party. Instead, they are interested in finding their own way, but are unsure how to do this without direction (or, as they fear, manipulation) from older leaders. Waheed is frustrated by his lack of historical knowledge. He wants at the very least to have a copy of the Lebanese constitution, and this is what has brought him and Hisham to the Virgin Megastore.

Youth and Politics

After a short conversation about modern Arab history, they invite me to the camp. Hisham studies at the American University of Beirut but has hardly gone to class since coming to the camp. Waheed is 26 and dropped out of high school when his father could no longer afford the fees and now works at a bakery—or at least he did before he pitched his tent at the camp. With them are Wassim, a Lebanese born in Venezuela, who had just deferred his military service to join the protest, and Bassam, who has a shaven head and an elaborate tattoo on his right shoulder.

Waheed walks around the camp conversing with people in other tents, or inviting their representatives to visit his. It is easy to do this because the camp has an established geography—most of Lebanon's major political parties (except, of course, the pro-Syrian factions) have representatives here. Hariri's Future Movement has a large tent. The Free Patriotic Movement, the party of General Michel Aoun, is well represented, as is the Lebanese Forces Party, a civil war offshoot of the right-wing Phalange Party. Neither Amal nor Hizbullah, the Shia parties, has an official presence, but a young Shia shaykh has recently arrived with his entourage.

On the day I arrive, Waheed invites Kamal, a representative of the Lebanese Forces Party, to tell us about the party's platform. Salaams are exchanged, and we sit on white plastic chairs around an unlit campfire. Waheed starts by asking Kamal a deceptively simple question: "What's the Lebanese Forces' plan for the future?"

Kamal is 20 and has lost his job as a printer's assistant because being at the camp has kept him from work. He is fashionably unshaven and wears his hair in long loose curls. Hanging off the zip of his jacket is

Middle class youth are emerging as an oppositional force in Lebanon. Somewhat aware of their past and tired of their present, the youth desperately want to forge their own future. Hundreds of young people, most under 25, camped out in a tent city in Beirut in an attempt to influence the course of political change in Lebanon.¹

the Lebanese Forces symbol, a crucifix with a jagged edge at the bottom. Kamal answers by saying that the Syrians must leave with their intelligence services, all the militias must be disarmed, and the elections must be free and fair. These goals line up with freedom, sovereignty, and independence, the mantra of the newly founded Inde-

pendence Uprising. (No one here calls what is happening the "Cedar Revolution," a phrase Washington seems to have invented.)

He counts off three more demands: an increase in the minimum wage, the return of Aoun from exile, and the release of Samir Geagea, the head of the Lebanese Forces who was imprisoned 11 years ago after a trial that Amnesty International ruled unfair. "If Geagea doesn't come out of jail, we will have a civil war again. Trust me," Kamal says, less as a threat than as a statement. His intensity frightens me. The last two demands, which are often made by the Lebanese opposition, are potentially divisive. Aoun and Geagea have plenty of blood on their hands.

Waheed slumps in his chair. Kamal has not given him much idea what the future Lebanon would look like. "I respect your opinions," he says earnestly, "even if I don't necessarily agree with them."

After the meeting, Kamal tells me to come back to the camp later. The Lebanese Forces group will put up a large, metal-framed tent and Kamal thinks that the police will try to stop them because of the metal frame. "CNN is coming," he says. "The police will be there." I return in the evening, but see no police and witness no violence. Instead, I watch a bunch of young men with portable drills erect a large, solid looking tent, which, incidentally (or not), has the effect of dwarfing the tents of the independent group.

The camp's problem was by this time clear to me. The history of Lebanon is one of deep, almost unbridgeable, sectarian divisions, which people believed—"hoped" is perhaps a better word—could finally be overcome after the Hariri assassination. The killing of the former prime minister illustrated the need for a strong and unified Lebanon. Unity is repeatedly called for at the camp, but its geography demonstrates the same confessional divisions that exist in the country itself—which is what makes the independent group all the more exceptional. On the other hand, it would be wrong to say that there is no significance in what is happening here. In Lebanon, according to Muhammad Ali Khalidi, a philosophy professor at the American University of Beirut, it is rare to meet members of other sects. Here, they are not only meeting but also talking to each other.

Memories of War

The people in the camp are too young to have fought in the civil war, although many remember it. Waheed and Hisham told me it was a lot of fun. Waheed collected spent cartridges, jammed rifles, and missile casings, hiding them in a makeshift fort of branches and leaves. Hisham used to sneak out of his house to watch Israeli and Syrian planes dog-fighting.

By the time I left Beirut, three bombs had exploded in predominantly Christian neighbourhoods, and with each blast talk of a new civil war increased. But almost everyone I spoke to, both inside and outside the camp, had an easy—perhaps too easy—answer as to why there would never be another civil war. We have unity now, I heard people say again and again. When I suggested that unity is easier with Syria as the common enemy, and that once Syria leaves, there will be real difficulties, most people said that the Lebanese are too smart for war now. "I don't think you have two civil wars within living memory of each other," Professor Khalidi assured me. Besides, he said, none of the parties except Hizbullah has many weapons, whereas in 1975 the militias and the Palestinians were armed to the teeth. Still, with each bombing, I heard more stories of well-heeled Lebanese making plans to leave the country if the situation got worse. And according to the Daily Star, sales of personal weapons have risen by as much as 70 per cent since the first bombing. A revolver's not a rocket launcher, but it is still a revolver.



Young people
in Beirut's
Tent City,
March 2005

PHOTO BY MOUSTAFA BAYOUMI, 2005

The afternoon after the second bombing, a particularly large group is discussing the prospects for civil war, and the opinions are often complex. Reine, a sophisticated 16-year-old, expresses profound scepticism about the camp's mission. She is sure that war is inevitable, and the problem is that young people are blindly following the leaders who brought the country to disaster before. I later ask Reine why, if she's so convinced of the inevitability of civil war, she is at the camp? "No one has the right to tell my country what to do," she says simply, as if I had asked a stupid question.

On Saturday night another bomb explodes in the predominantly Christian area of Sad el-Bouchrieh. Everyone at the camp is spooked by the blast. "Did you hear about the bombing?" Bassam asks me soberly. "We heard it, you know," he says. His eyes focus on somewhere off in the distance. "I don't know, man," he says after a pause. "Syria has to leave." He takes a deep drag from his cigarette. The orange glow from the tip lights his face for a moment in the dark. "I don't know if I'm ready to die, you know," he says, blowing smoke. "All they would have to do is put a bomb right here and it would be over. I don't know how long I can do this."

The next day, the group rents a van with a driver. Hisham and Bassam have talked a lot over the last few days about showing me other parts of Lebanon. Thirteen of us pile into the van. We stop and pick up food for a barbeque. By the time we reach Hisham's house in the mountains, it is clear that the trip is really for them, another way of blowing off steam. No one mentions last night's blast.

Hisham's house has been locked up for a while, but it is large and commands amazing views. While taking me on a tour, he tells me a story that must have been repeated many times in the family. During the war, the village below was a Lebanese Forces stronghold, and they had Hisham's Druze village under siege. One night, when it was known that Geagea was in the village below, one of Hisham's cousins along with four other men collected some guns, faked Lebanese Forces insignia on their uniforms, and sneaked down to the village. His cousin, he said, had a clear shot at Geagea, but as he was about to fire, a sniper hit him squarely in the chest. Hisham pokes me in the breastbone. The other Druze began shooting, fighting their way back up to their village. "The Lebanese Forces thought they were being attacked by a whole army," he says with pride, "but there were only five of them." Four, I think, after his cousin's death.

We return to the camp just in time for dinner and pick up pizzas from one of the larger tents. I notice that the Lebanese Forces tent now has two flags inside: a Lebanese flag and the banner of the Lebanese Forces, a flagrant breach of camp rules. The flags are pinned to the tent and between them is a cross. Since it is night time and the tent is lit, the flags shine through the white canvas. I point them out to Hisham, who snorts in disgust.

I leave Beirut later that night with the smell of campfire smoke still clinging to my clothes. Before I go, I run into Kamal in the Virgin Megastore. "Professor!" I hear behind me, and there he is, clean-shaven and now looking younger than his 20 years. Another Lebanese Forces member is with him, about the same age and with the same cross hanging from the zip of his jacket. "Come with us to the camp," he says warmly. I tell him I am on my way home. "To your hotel?" "New York." I am surprised by the look of regret that passes over his face. "I'll miss our discussions," he says, "really. When are you coming back?"

And I begin to wonder and to worry. In what circumstances will I find these young people the next time I am in Beirut? My optimism has been slowly fading since I arrived. I think about how, a few minutes before, I had been eating dinner with the independents. When they had finished their pizzas, the camp residents threw the cardboard boxes on the campfire. Maybe it was fatigue from our trip, or maybe it was anxiety about where the camp is heading, but everyone was quiet, staring blankly ahead, mesmerized by the flames, watching the boxes slowly turn into ash.

Note

1. A longer version of this essay was first published in the *London Review of Books* 27, no. 9 (May 2005): 35-36. Reprinted by permission.

Moustafa Bayoumi is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. He is co-editor with Andrew Rubin of *The Edward Said Reader* (Vintage, 2000).

Email: bayoumi@brooklyn.cuny.edu