

Lebanon: Sowing the seeds of tomorrow's violence

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The atmosphere of the Lebanese opposition demonstrations, which began last Friday and were planned in large part by Hizballah, Amal, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and their allies, has been very calm and festive, betraying the underlying tensions and outbursts of political violence in the country. In many ways, they exude a similar spirit to last year's months of demonstrating by the March 14 coalition, in which there was constant music interlaced with speeches, and people waving Lebanese flags and behaving as if they had just won a football game or were at a concert.

In general, there is more similarity than difference in the way both groups were mobilized in a top-down fashion, and the money involved in sustaining the demonstrations and propaganda, although the opposition clearly does not have an advertising agency like Saatchi & Saatchi designing its posters (incidentally, Saatchi, a multinational advertising agency in Lebanon, has also volunteered its services for free to re-brand Israel's world image). Even some of the chants are similar, for example, the Hizballah supporters in the opposition will say: "*Allah, Nasrallah, wel Dahye killa*" (God, Nasrallah, and all of the suburbs); while Hariri supporters in the March 14 coalition chant: "*Allah, Hariri, Tareeq el Jdeedeh*", referring to a street in Beirut heavily populated by Sunni Muslims.

Both sides have used the Lebanese flag in their demonstrations as a sign of their patriotism over and above the other side. This maneuver seems like an attempt to prostitute national symbols to excite popular hopes. In the latest exploitation of the people's nationalism, the government has called for everyone who believes in Lebanon and has allegiance to the government to put a Lebanese flag on their balcony. I am reminded of how the Nazis marked the doors of Jewish homes during WWII so that they may round them up at a later date. I am thinking to begin mapping the city and its homes flag by flag so that I may be of use to the Gestapo if a war should ignite! After all, what else is this show of patriotism supposed to prove? Am I less Lebanese than my neighbor who has put up a flag? Is the current government in service of its entire people or just those who have flags on their balconies? What does this do besides turn neighbor against neighbor and expose the political divisions within every street, or every building? This is not exactly a responsible government.

More deeply, the apparent flag prostitution re-creates a discourse that is intent on claiming that those not in "our" camp are not patriotic, not Lebanese, and therefore enemies of the state, because they are-naturally-working for foreign interests. Thus, we arrive at the accusations in which the opposition is Iranian-Syrian, and the government is American-French. Both sides are traitors yet both sides are saying they want to share power. Anyone who has the slightest idea of the politics of negotiation must surely see the almost total

collapse of any future possibility at negotiation.

The most significant differences between the demonstrations in the two camps that first strike observers is that this sit-in is much larger than the continuous sit-ins of last year. In addition, the crowd's general composition seems a lot poorer, which exposes the economic and class war that the Lebanese are so determined to ignore, lest it taint their free market economy and affect elites, who span across all sects (there is a gentleman's agreement on every major issue in Lebanon, and this is one of them).

Take Ahmad, a 20-year-old Sunni who belongs to Hariri's Mustaqbal party and lives in the Sunni neighborhood of Tareeq El-Jdeedeh. He would rather resort to sectarian rhetoric and tells me how the Shi'a are "*tattar*," a derogatory word to imply unrefined, low class; he continues with anger saying they are "filthy." He cites the way they have made an apparent mess in Beirut's downtown area, whereas during last year's demonstrations the participants kept the place clean. These are categories I have heard before in reference to the rhetoric surrounding genocide (recall how the Interahamwe spoke of Tutsis in Rwanda). In fact, any mess made might actually be a way for the demonstrators to say that they reject this downtown as a private space operated by Hariri's company.

Perhaps even more disturbing is that he tells me that both Mustaqbal and the Lebanese Forces are sending party members for military training in Jordan, where Ahmad personally spent a few months. He tells me about how the Shi'a are driving into his neighborhood, shooting in the air, cursing, then driving away. A few days ago, the men of Tareeq el-Jdeedeh decided to react and violence erupted. Ahmad is convinced that the Sunnis do not do the same thing. He claims that he would never attack anyone and would only defend himself. I am reminded of how security is actually one manifestation of violence rooted in the anticipation of violence, and therefore we arm and train ourselves in the name of this virtue, proclaiming that we will never attack and only use our weapons and training for defense. Aren't the Shi'a saying the same thing? Ahmad says no, but I seem to recall three nights ago outside my house in Hamra, when men from the Sunni Mustaqbal party came by, taunting with their slogans and aggression.

In the media we don't hear of the daily tensions between groups living on community-defined internal borders, be they sectarian or political. We only hear when the violence erupts in Sassine Square or Tareeq el-Jdeedeh, while the seeds of tomorrow's violence are sewn quietly. We need to address those moments, but how can we do that when they remain silent to us all?

Violence should not be looked for in death tolls and the statistics of destroyed buildings, or in the sounds of shelling and gunshots. Violence begins in its anticipation, and thus, we can begin to understand how it is that when parties such as the Mustaqbal party and Lebanese Forces begin training their members, in anticipation of violence, we effectively enter a condition of war.

For many people who have not been downtown, there is a palpable fear that the center is dangerous; it is where this war may ignite and we must stay away from it as much as possible. We often assume power and conflict come from the center, from those spaces where political leaders speak and where the people gather. But we are slowly starting to see, even those of us least attuned, that the real threat comes from the margins. It comes in

the moonlight hours where all seems quiet and a boy returns home from the downtown demonstrations. It comes from somewhere like Tareeq el-Jdeedeh or Sassine Square, where subversive borders have been laid over time to define sectarian and political geographies.

I remain a firm believer that our problems are not sectarian, they are rooted deeper than the simple politics of “pro-” or “anti-American” can explain. They are rooted first in the conflict over what constitutes internal and external issues for Lebanon (to what extent is internal politics a factor of external issues over Palestine, Iraq and US interests in the region). And second, our problems are rooted within a powerful discourse produced by the world powers, from which we are forced into a corner (a failure on our part), and made to believe that sectarianism is the bane of our existence (they have succeeded in doing this in Iraq and allowed it to consume the region). Sectarian identities make Lebanon the beautiful country that it is. What we must understand is how to make sectarian identities a source of strength and progress rather than a podium for discriminatory politics.

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