

# Ceasefire among the Cedars

## Rebuilding Beirut

by Paul Haidostian

As soon as the ceasefire came into effect on August 14, a day after the heaviest bombing on the southern suburbs of Beirut, dozens of thousands of displaced people headed back home. In thousands of cases, this meant driving on dirt roads to reach the rubble once called houses and apartment buildings, where countless unidentified corpses had long lost count of the days since they were overcome by bombs and bricks. Our own community feels an undeserved privilege. It suffered much less than many others. Yet, more genuinely than ever before, all communities in Lebanon succeeded in reaching out to the displaced in effective and practical ways.

It took more than a month for the sanctimonious powers of this world to allow for and negotiate a fragile ceasefire in a region that has become even more brittle than before. In the meantime, at least 1,150 civilians were killed in Lebanon, more than 4,000 were injured, and so much was destroyed. The whole Middle East and indeed many people around the globe were traumatized as a chapter in this "Crisis in the Middle East" seems to have tentatively closed. And now, every party has claimed a "historic" victory in an "existential" war. No one has apologized, no one has admitted they were wrong, no party has promised to work for peace, and probably no ethical discussion will be allowed to consider the war crimes committed. Psychologists often divide cultures between those that are shame-oriented and those that are guilt-oriented. What about a third category, a self-distancing majority that has an arrested or suspended feeling of both shame and guilt?

Lebanon is under political and diplomatic pressure now while the Israeli blockade of sorts continues, and my questions become more complicated. How will the country handle the pressures, continue in its divided

ways, and at the same time rebuild all that was ruined and shattered? While the south of Lebanon is promised days of caution and tension, can Lebanon go back to normal life in one part and be insecure in another? Will the one-month unexpected Hizbullah survival encourage and boost other radical resistance movements in the world to use similar guerilla methods? Will the Israeli carte blanche to use state violence as a means of national existence further lower the barely ethical standards of the international community? Will the current global unintelligent and uneducated "war on terror" use the fear of the world population as a means for greater control of minds, policies, and governments? Will the character of mainline religion, i.e. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, continue shifting into intolerance, violence, neo-totalitarianism, and uncritical living?

I see reasons for being hopeful and encouraged. A few weeks ago I mourned the fact that bridges were destroyed before anything else. Now, since the very first hours of the ceasefire, a dozen Lebanese businessmen and banks have pledged that the first things they will build are the bridges. As we always expect of the Lebanese, even within forty-eight hours, some makeshift roads and bridges were already functioning and thousands of returning cars were "hitting the roads," not bombing them. I have no doubt that the world will be surprised, again, at the speed of reconstruction of the country.

The summer semester of Haigazian University resumed on August 23. To my knowledge, that is the earliest date for any university to reopen after the crisis. As students of various backgrounds and ideologies regathered at Haigazian, we began to recapture our opportunity to create an atmosphere of dialogue among them, to rekindle their zest for education, to reconfigure their hopelessness into creativity, to re-treat their disappointment in God and humanity with



Photo: Sevag Arslanian

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examples and messages of faithful service, and to re-create all the positive and beautiful things that Lebanon has been known by.

In this politically volcanic region of the world, and amidst the uncertainties of the present and the future, I celebrate our faith in a God who sustains us in everything. This is our belief, our experience, and our hope for the future.

Whether the future will bring further violence or not, or how soon, we do not know. In fact, globalization of all sorts of processes and realities in the world will increasingly mean that the insecurity of one is the insecurity of all, a lesson we should have learned from our Christian faith, but failed to.

What we know here is that we can bring our share in peacemaking among and through those who enter our gates at Haigazian University, an institution whose foundations go deep into the history of the perseverance of the Armenian people, into the Christian sacrificial message of forgiveness, and into the deep roots of the magnificent cedars. ■

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