

# Look to the Lebanon



by Theodore Dalrymple

There is, apparently, a saying in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the effect that anyone who says that he understands the Lebanon does not understand the Lebanon. I am not sure that this saying does not apply to most countries, possibly even to Liechtenstein. Nevertheless, human beings are compelled by their nature to try to understand what cannot be understood; and therefore when, after a visit, my brother-in-law left behind him a magazine devoted to the Middle East with a long series of articles devoted to the Lebanon, I began to read it.

Even a single article had the power to confuse. One must not mistake the *baltajiya* for the *qabadayat* or the *dhahiye*, but I did not find it easy to keep them apart in my mind: who they were and what exactly they did, though none of it seemed very good.

Yet some kind of outline of the country became clear, like a large building looming out of a thick fog as you approach it. Then, suddenly, I had a flash of illumination: I had seen the future of the Western world, and it was Lebanonization!

In the Lebanon, everything depends on which religious

community you belong to, even your water and electricity supply (both intermittent and unreliable). Overseeing the whole polity are corrupt, kleptocratic, oligarchic leaders of various religious, political, and territorial fiefdoms, who dispute hegemony among themselves but nevertheless display a certain class solidarity so that nothing should change fundamentally and they remain permanently in charge. Protests and revolutions come and go, but the elite go on forever.

The potential for violence is always there, and indeed often breaks out; but most of the population, accustomed to chaos and breakdown, has become adept at survival. Life for them is a question of overcoming everyday obstacles, combined with evading the conflicts around them. Meanwhile, the elite live well.

No analogies are exact, but Western societies seem to be fracturing into various confessional communities each of which, like the Maronites, Druzes, Shiites, Sunni, and others, claims its share of the politico-economic spoils. They struggle like worms or grubs in the tins in which anglers keep their bait, while an unchanging elite preside, or at least glide, godlike, over the whole. In the meantime, public administration deteriorates, infrastructure rots, and inflation rockets.

For years, the Lebanon lived far beyond its means, consuming far more than it produced. The fundamental document of its polity was the promissory note—which, of course, could never be redeemed. It attracted capital, foreign and domestic (mainly the former), by offering spectacular rates of return, paying them with the fresh capital attracted by those rates. Those who understood that this was nothing but a Ponzi scheme, or who were lucky, could do very well out of it, if they timed their exit well (in a casino economy, timing is everything); but those who did well were a small number by comparison with those who suffered as a result of the inevitable collapse. Sam

Bankman-Fried was the Lebanon writ small.

As for the confessionalism according to which administrative posts from which looting the public purse is permitted and expected and which are divided up by religious affiliation, we can see something similar happening in the West, with demands that positions (except in sports teams, sport being too serious a matter for political interference) are allocated not according to ability but according to demographic proportionality. One's demographic characteristic becomes one's religion; and just as religious people are inclined to believe that they, and they alone, are in possession of the truth (otherwise they could hardly maintain their faith), so people of a given demographic come to believe that special truths or virtues are vouchsafed to them, as is desert, which must be rewarded or recognized by appointment to jobs from top to bottom (but especially the top).

The history of the Lebanon does not suggest that this confessionalism is a recipe for social peace, to put it rather mildly; and indeed, we can see that the search for so-called racial justice in Western societies, particularly in the United States, has not calmed anger but rather incited or exacerbated it, albeit for the benefit of a few leaders. (Whenever I see the words "racial justice" I am astonished at the absence of a sense of irony of whoever has used them. Have they never heard of "Jewish science" or "bourgeois science"?)

It is true that the promissory notes issued in Western countries—shares in technology companies are often little more than such notes—can keep their value longer than those issued in the Lebanon. For example, so long as faith in the dollar, *faute de mieux*, remains, the United States can go on issuing promissory notes in almost any quantity; one averts one's mind from thinking about the horrors that would ensue, not only for America but for the whole world, should that faith evaporate. But it would be foolish in this world in which nothing is permanent to believe that the faith could

never evaporate simply because it would be disastrous if it did. It is not quite true that things can always get worse: The 20th century invented several ways in which things could get no worse. Nevertheless, most of the time things *can* get worse, and collapse of faith in the dollar is (I surmise) one of the things that could cause things to get worse. The phrase *the almighty dollar* is rarely used with any connotation of affection or approbation; but *the powerless dollar* might one day come to have a connotation far worse than mere disdain.

Go to the ant, thou sluggard, advises or even demands the Bible, addressing itself to the idlers among us, consider her ways and be wise. If I were revising the Bible today, I might write, "Go to the Lebanon, thou citizen, thou investor, consider its ways and be wise." But the problem is that no one learns from the experience of others, and quite often not even from his own, let alone from valid deductions from self-evident premises. Man is the rational animal that somehow manages never to learn, at least not how to live.

First published in [\*Taki's magazine\*](#).