

Hope in the Heart of a Beirut Slum: Living Stories between Shadow and Light, Le Horpes, France: Tahaddi France, 2021.

PREFACE

You have your Lebanon with her problems, and I have my Lebanon with her beauty. You have your Lebanon with all her prejudices and struggles, and I have my Lebanon with all her dreams and securities. Your Lebanon is a political knot, a national dilemma, a place of conflict and deception. My Lebanon is a place of beauty and dreams of enchanting valleys and splendid mountains.

Khalil Gibran, *The Eye of the Prophet* (1920)

Lebanon continues to be an enigma and a land of contradictions. Images of glittering buildings along the Corniche and of restaurants in the mountains with tables laden with sumptuous food and spectacular views hide a dark secret about Lebanon – that a significant percentage of the population are in need or live in poverty. Most of them do not live in slums like those in Asia and Africa, or the favelas of Brazil. The poor live hidden in the midst of the concrete jungles of Beirut and the other cities or in marginalized communities in rural Lebanon.

A 2008 United Nations country study on Lebanon was a shock to many people when it stated for the first time that 20.59 percent of Lebanese in the country were poor and an additional 7.97 percent were extremely poor, totaling 28.56 percent. That meant that more than a quarter of the population lived at or below the national poverty line. These figures became even more concerning when one considered the various groups of foreigners living in the country. These included Palestinian refugees and foreign migrant workers who were not accounted for in the 2008 survey. They were more likely than not to be living at or below the poverty line.

Since then, there has been a huge influx of Syrian refugees, the ongoing economic collapse and civil unrest, and the explosion at Beirut port. All of these together increased the overall numbers of people in need. The United Nations states that today 55% live below the poverty line, with 23% of the population living in extreme poverty.¹ The images of the poor and people in need has tarnished the self-image of Lebanon with its long history, rich traditions and culture, and business savvy - a nation that is resilient and has always come back from the brink of disaster. Unfortunately, in the midst of each resurrection a lot of people are getting left behind.

As Beirut rebuilt after the Civil War in 1990, not all parts of the city experienced the renaissance that downtown Beirut and many of the suburbs showed with their new constructions and rebuilt infrastructure. The journalist Samir Kassir, in his monumental history of Beirut writes, “The belt of misery, concentrated in the southern suburbs and now the bastion of Hizbullah, constitutes another source of atrophy on the edge of the capital, and one that is less easily dealt with since, in

¹ “Lebanon’s Economic Collapse in Numbers,” Asharq Al-Awsat, 2021, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2865231/lebanons-economic-collapse-numbers>.

addition to the crisis of public finances, all proposals for development there...are likely to run into political obstacles.”²

Tucked inside this belt of misery, Hay-el Gharbeh is hidden behind the stadium in Beirut and is invisible from the major highway that skirts it. It is bounded on other sides by a wholesale vegetable market, a refugee camp, and a lower middle-class neighborhood. The inhabitants live in makeshift shelters, which have evolved into some sort of permanency. For the longest time it did not have access to government services, because the community did not officially exist. Not only do the people not have legal title to the land, but they belong to marginalized ethnic groups that most of the country have ignored or discriminated against.

It is here that the story of Tahaddi begins. This book about the history of Tahaddi is unique. Rather than a recollection of dates and events, this telling of Tahaddi’s history is the stories of the people who were there as they saw and experienced the events that would have a profound impact on the lives of so many. Canadian sociologist Arthur Frank writes, “Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided.... Human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those stories impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories...”³

Personal stories capture human experiences in ways that have meaning and significance, thus defining the experiences for the individual and the community. The personal stories in this book are not written by a disengaged journalist or researcher. They are recollections of the harsh realities of the aftermath of war, the desperation and hopelessness of poverty, of human trafficking, and the tragedies that scar families and individuals. They expose the deep currents of evil and injustice that run through a society. At times the stories are very raw and visceral, and hard to read. But what is different about these stories that emerge out of the desolate places in people’s lives, where it seemed that even God had abandoned them, is that the tragedies are sometimes not the final word in their life’s journeys. As a result of this collective storytelling, one gets a glimpse of what is possible in the midst of very difficult and challenging circumstances. They provide hope that change is possible and that compassion has a way of transforming lives.

The story of Tahaddi and the people involved intersects with my own story and has very deep personal meaning for me. I had lived in Lebanon as a teenager during the pre-Civil War days in the late 1960s and early 1970s because of my father’s posting with the United Nations. Living in an expat cocoon and going to the American Community School, the Beirut and Lebanon I knew was best described by photographer Maxime du Camp, who when arriving in Beirut in 1850 wrote,

Beirut is incomparable...the country that surrounds it, the forest of parasol pines, the road bordered with nopals, myrtle, and pomegranate trees in which chameleons run; the view of the Mediterranean and the aspect of the wooded summits of the Lebanon that draw the purity of their lines on the sky. It is a retreat for the contemplative, for the disillusioned,

² Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (London: University of California Press, 2010), 539.

³ Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.

for those who have been wounded by existence; it seems to me that one can live happily there doing nothing but looking at the mountains and the sea.⁴

About the same time Henri Guys, the former French consul, wrote that Beirut now had “consulates from almost every nation, commercial establishments, hotels, well stocked stores, a European pharmacy, and finally a casino – a luxury that only ports of the first rank can permit themselves.”⁵ These beautiful and idyllic images were just as real a hundred years later when we lived in Lebanon. However, I was completely unaware of the plight of the refugees in the country and of the pockets of marginalized and poor communities in the rural areas. I left in 1975, three months after the start of the Civil War, having very briefly experienced the brutality of the conflict that would engulf the country for the next two decades.

The Lebanon that I came back to 34 years later as an adult was to a deeply changed country. The natural beauty and the historical sites as I remembered them were still there. However, Lebanese society had changed. The different religious confessions, scarred by the memories of the Civil War, lived in their own separate areas for protection. I became aware for the first time that there were communities of people who did not belong to the mainstream religious, ethnic or political groups and who now lived in poverty on the margins of society. The Dom, also known as Nawars or gypsies, are one such community. Visiting Hay el Gharbeh for the first time was a shock for me as I realized that I was not in the Kibera slum in Nairobi, but in a slum in Beirut. This was a part of Lebanon I had not known.

In order to fully appreciate what Agnes, Myriam, and so many others who later joined them have accomplished, one has to understand the nature of society in the Near and Middle East. These societies are communal, in that they are built around the idea that clans and tribes within ethnic and religious groups take care of their own. Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century Arab historian and sociologist provides insight into the nature of collectivist or communal societies. He writes, “only tribes held together by group feelings can live in the desert...”⁶ since the group ensured the survival and wellbeing of the individual in a harsh environment. Yet this obligation was always limited in practice to the immediate group, family or clan and very rarely beyond it. The reason for this is the concept of *assabiyah*, which Ibn Khaldun refers to as group solidarity or groups consciousness.⁷ The fear is that a loss of group cohesion as described by *assabiyah* will result in the destruction of the community. A focus on group cohesion ensures the survival of the group but in the process excludes the outsider and other groups.

Contrary to social norms and expectations, what the team at Tahaddi did (and continue to do) was to step out of the comfort of their own social and religious community and walk with those who had been rejected and discriminated by all the other sectarian and religious groups in the country. In post war Lebanon, where each communal group fiercely guarded themselves and only took care of their own, this was radical and unheard of.

⁴ Quoted in Fouad Debbas, *Des Photographes a Beyrouth 1840-1918* (Paris: Marval, 2001), 27.

⁵ Henri Guys, *Beyrouth et Le Liban*, (published in 1850), (London: Forgotten Books, 2019), 21.

⁶ Quoted in Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), x.

⁷ Fida Mohammad, "Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change: A Comparison Between Hegel, Marx And Durkheim," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 36-37.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf based on his own experience of ethnic and religious conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s addresses the issue of social exclusion. He describes exclusion as not accepting those who do not adhere to the values, religion, and accepted behavior of the community. They are seen as inferior and are thus excluded. They are perceived as a threat to the values and security of the community because they are different.

The response to this tendency to exclude is described by Volf, of how God responds to human beings. “God’s reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model of how human beings should relate to the other.”⁸ Among other things, he says that it is critical to make space in oneself for the other. Taking the side of those suffering is in the prophetic and apostolic traditions of the Bible. Volf writes, “These people hear the groans of the suffering, take a stance, and act...After all, they are called to seek and struggle for *God’s* justice, not their own.”⁹ This is what I see the team at Tahaddi doing.

Seeing the work of Tahaddi over the years, and even partnering with them in small ways at times, resulted in a profound paradigm shift in my understanding of what is the mission of God - *missio Dei*. The work of God in redeeming, reconciling, and restoring His creation through Christ is multifaceted and embraces the whole world. Yet invariably, the starting point is in embracing those who are different, who do not seem to belong, or who are on the margins of society.

May this book be a paradigm shift and an encouragement for you as you see hope emerge out of the desolate places where the people society has rejected live.

Dr. Rupen Das
Mississauga, Canada
Co-author of *Profiles of Poverty: The Human Face of Poverty in Lebanon* and
Author of *The God that the Poor Seek*

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 100.

⁹ *Ibid*, 219