



The United States of ... Lebanon?

"How long will it be before your country puts an end to conflicts?" an American friend in Washington DC recently asked me, to which I simply replied "2 to 3 months max". He was unsure about my answer but I immediately smiled and told him not to get his hopes up since Lebanese have been saying that ever since 1973.

Forty years ago, Lebanon began its downward spiral suffering one heartbreak after the other and the country appears to be continuing on this path hopefully not for forever. Welcome to the "Disunited States of Lebanon."

Let's draw some parallels between the land of the brave and the land of the Cedars, shall we?

Good Governance: In America, every state governs itself under the federal umbrella, a national system run by politicians operating mainly from Washington DC. It's why the country is called "United" States. In our "tiny paradise" here, we have many states within the state that have claimed their independence from the Lebanese nation, all the way from Akkar in the North to Tripoli, Becharre and Zgharta, East Bekaa in Ersal and Baalbeck, to the South and in Mount Lebanon like the Shouf, the Beirut Western Suburbs and even within the capital Beirut. This disjointed state of affairs is under the umbrella of the republic, a lip service agency run by leaders residing in Beirut and Baabda, the seat of the presidential palace, but whose hands are firmly tied to moving posts, making it impossible for them to govern.



Trust in leadership: A good portion of US Citizens are concerned about their businesses and jobs, but trust the two leading political parties – Democrats and Republicans – to debate and negotiate a fair and universal solution that addresses most people's needs. In Lebanon, on the other hand, everyone is involved in all aspects of the Lebanese policy-making and each tries to convince everyone else what's best for the country. So two parties run the US while in Lebanon, two parties run every corner of every street. Lovely!



True Colors: In America, they have one Black Friday (cheerfully tied to thanksgiving) and a host of colorful holidays; in Lebanon we have Black Saturday, Black flags, Men in Black and even a village called the Father of Black (Abou Al Aswad).

Economy: Amazingly, when you listen to Dr. Ben S. Bernanke, the US Chairman of the Federal Reserve System, talking economics, you realize that even the most powerful economy in the world is barely holding it together. Listening to Dr. Riad Salameh, Lebanon's Central Bank Governor, talking finance and providing fancy numbers and figures about the Lebanese economy, urging investors and encouraging expats to consider Lebanon a safe haven for their funds, we start thinking "why can't the US learn from us??" Here's another thought! With the US Dollar losing ground to the Yen and the Euro and weakening ever so gradually, maybe America should start thinking of pegging its currency to the mighty Lebanese Pound, a 'Lira' that is miraculously unshakable despite all events in the country.



Transportation: Traffic jams are a common sight in the States but you notice Americans waiting patiently, often for hours on end, until authorities sort out the issue, be it an accident or rush hour. In Lebanon, we take things into our own hands, climbing over curbs, cars and even people to reach our final destination without stopping to street or lighted signs, red or blinking, while the men in charge of guiding traffic – uniformed, heavily armed internal security forces – are too busy smoking a cigarette, or whats'apping on their smart phones. It's a green light all the way come what may.



Investments: I heard that a company in the US is in the process of issuing bonds with a maturity date of 1000 years!!!! Wow! My own son at George Washington University has to deliver a project that evaluates Twitter stocks for the next 5 years. In Lebanon, on the other hand, any expectations beyond the next 24 hrs are almost unmanageable. This is due to our decisions being tied to developments in every country in the region, Russia, the US, and far away galaxies in the universe!



Environment: Part of Staten Island is an area called "Fresh Kills", a dump site for New York City. A similar one lies in Homestead, Miami, but all landfills in the States are closely regulated by the EPA and treated in compliance with top

environmental standards. In Lebanon, we have very “ancient kills”, historic if you will, so much so that dump sites have become landmarks to give directions by, with these eye sores easily noticed in Burj Hammoud, Na3meh and in the southern city of Sidon. The Potomak River in DC is considered the most contaminated river on earth; the Litani, Owaly and Nahr al Kalb Rivers in Lebanon can put the Potomac to shame if anyone dares to test them. But that doesn’t stop the Lebanese from choosing these locations as their favorite site to have a weekend picnic!

Shopping: Trolleys in US supermarkets are controlled by a wireless brake system within the facilities’ parameters. In Lebanon you can take your trolley home with you or sell them for scraps; no one cares.

Noise control: Taking the midnight train from Washington DC to New York is an enjoyable experience. When the train passes near inhabited areas, its speed never exceeds 10 mph, in order not to disturb the sleepy neighbors, and then picks up the speed back to 130 mph when back on wide open land. In Lebanon, we have no trains (though we do have a fully staffed train authority to control ghost passengers and cargo on remnants tracks now running under cement buildings and factories), but truck drivers will do their usual honky-tonk, disturbing the peace round the clock.



Yet the Lebanese go on with their daily lives despite the threats and power cuts, the conspiracy theories and the fanatics. They go on because history shows that nothing lasts forever. No amount of corruption or daily political disruption can overcome the will of a people united over human principles of justice and togetherness, the right to live in peace and provide a prosperous future for young generations. Despite the tragic events in the history of this country, I still believe that if the Lebanese decide to preserve the dignity and social structure of their country, no power on earth could stop them. Keep the hope and work hard for a future when a “United State of Lebanon” is born again and for good and forever.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

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