

I.

This, too, must be repeated. Between July 12 and August 13, 2006, the so-called beginning and end of this most recent and ongoing Middle Eastern crisis, more than one thousand civilians died. Hundreds of soldiers died. Thousands of civilians were injured. Hundred of thousands were displaced. Millions were scared. Countless were traumatized. Billions of dollars were lost. Billions of dollars were made.

Lebanon yet again in the summer of '06, echoing the spring of '96, the summer of '93, the never-to-be-forgotten summer of '82, and every other invasion, skirmish, clash, incursion, and battle between Israel and Lebanon over the past sixty years.

II.

"Equally evil," I heard a progressive-or-was-it-conservative acquaintance say of Hezbollah and the Israeli Army. Equally evil: The killing of 1,187 Lebanese civilians and the killing of 43 Israeli civilians. Equally evil: the killing of between 80 to 530 Hezbollah soldiers and the killing of 119 Israeli soldiers. Equally Evil: the destruction of hundreds of cars, dozens of roads, thousands of trees, 2,000 homes and other property in Israel, and the destruction of 15,000 houses and homes, 400 miles of roads, 150 bridges and interchanges (1 in 4 in the country), all national airports, electrical power plants, food industry factories, warehouses, dams, television and radio stations, hospitals, ambulances, civil defense centers, schools, mosques, churches, communication networks, and 85 miles of sea coast when 15,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil spilled onto Lebanon's coast after Israel bombed the Jiyeh power station, causing the worst ecological crisis in Lebanon's history. Equally evil: A Katyusha rocket filled with hundreds of tiny metal ball bearings and carrying a 22-220-pound warhead, and Popeyes, Nimrods, Delilahs, Spices, NTDs, MSOVs with their 22-5000 pound warheads. (While we are on the topic, did the same attentive analysts who counted and broadcast to the world the exact number of Katyushas hitting Israel every day also count and broadcast the exact number of explosive items dropped daily by Israel on Lebanon? Four thousand, in case you were wondering. As my friend Lucien remarked, surely Anderson Cooper, who on CNN bravely disassembled Syrian- or Iranian-supplied Katyushas to reveal the deadly metal ball bearings inside, could have taken the time to disassemble American-supplied M483A1 Dual Purpose Improved Conventional Munitions, or the American supplied M-26 cluster bombs to reveal the 644 M77 submunitions packed inside that have devastated the Lebanese village of Blida on July 19, 2006.

III.

Please try to understand me when I say that this is not a call for evenhandedness. I am not saying that the American, European, or Arab popular press report in an impartial manner on this Middle Eastern knot. I have long ago disabused myself of this dominant fiction of impartiality, even as I thanklessly catalogue bias in this or that article, this or that statement, this or that clip; even as I continue to unpack ideological interest in everything spoken, written, imaged, and believed; even as I risk dying from laughter as I force myself (every time for the last time) to listen to NPR and the BBC, not to mention the major American, French, British, and Arab networks, let alone CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, LBC, New TV, Al-Manar, or Al Jazeera. I almost did die from laughter in the last few weeks listening to Olmert, Peretz, Livni, Nasrallah, Seniora, Bush, Rice, Annan, Putin, Chirac, and to shameless Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian, Palestinian, and other Arab leaders. This near-death experience reminded me of the writer and artist Jalal Toufic who writes:

All I ask of this world to which I have already given three books is that it become less laughable, so that I would be able to laugh again without dying of it. And that it does so soon before my somberness becomes second nature. This era has made me somber not only through all the barbarisms and genocides it has perpetuated, but also through being so laughable. Even in this period of the utmost sadness for an Arab in general, and an Iraqi in specific, I fear dying of laughter more than of melancholic suicide, and thus I am more prone to relinquish my guard when it comes to being sad than to laughing at laughable phenomena.

IV.

Surely the Lebanese brought this upon themselves, I heard the same progressive-or-was-it-conservative voice say. Israel was only obliging, doing for the Lebanese what they would not do themselves: kill, decapitate, obliterate, incapacitate, cripple, destroy, neutralize, weaken, restrict, contain (I lost track of every verb used by Olmert, Peretz, Livni, Bush, Blair, and Rice and their generals to characterize this operation's impact) Hezbollah. As if Hezbollah was some mole to be surgically removed from the Lebanese body. As if Hezbollah was not part and parcel of Lebanon's political, social, cultural, and economic life. As if Hezbollah does not represent a million of Lebanon's residents. For anyone still confused about this, please revisit the massive March 8, 2005, demonstration in downtown Beirut by Hezbollah and its allies (to be countered by the even larger crowd of March 14, 2005) that clearly demonstrated for anyone

who still doubted it that Hezbollah, like its Lebanese counterparts, is also a vital political organ. Remove it and the whole body collapses. You cannot wish a million people away. Or can you? Oh yes, I almost forgot what many of us still suppose: that they, the Shiites of Lebanon -- these men and women with dubious national allegiance -- must all be ideological dupes, fooled by Iran and Syria, their judgment clouded by socio-economic incentives, or better-yet, by other-worldly considerations (that classic and weighty model of ideology that has yet to be abandoned by progressives and conservatives alike). Yes, that is right. That must be it.

V.

A few of the false choices some of us face:

Unequivocal and publicly expressed support of the National Islamic Resistance (Hezbollah).

or

Unequivocal and publicly expressed support of the National Islamic Resistance with reservation expressed privately, among those attuned to the complexity of Lebanese political life. (This category -- those attuned to the complexity of Lebanese political life -- remains without definition, or rather, its definitions always postponed, altered arbitrarily it seems, given the class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, language, and fashion sense of those seeking membership).

or

Publicly expressed support of the National Islamic Resistance with reservations expressed publicly about the timing and motives of Hezbollah's capture of two Israeli soldiers, and the party's unilateral decision to drag the country into a war it was not prepared for.

or

Publicly expressed support of the National Islamic Resistance, with reservation expressed publicly about the loss of Lebanese and Israeli civilian life, even as one does not privately give a damn about Israeli civilians given that they are all right-wing, or left-wing-on-every-other-issue-except-Palestine, racists-Soviet-Union fleeing-single-party-voting, trees-in-Israel-buying-Brooklyn-born-and-residing, Palestinian-baby-killers, nuk'em-all-chanting, messianic-holier-than-thou, intent-on-ruling-the-world-expansionist-settler-Zionists anyway.

or

Unequivocal and publicly expressed support of Israel.

or

Unequivocal and publicly expressed support of Israel with reservations expressed privately, among those attuned to the complexity of Israeli political life and Jewish life in general. (This category -- those attuned to the complexity of Israeli political life and Jewish life in general -- remains without definition, or rather, its definitions always postponed, altered arbitrarily it seems, given the class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, language, and fashion sense of those seeking membership).

or

Unequivocal and publicly expressed support of Israel with reservation expressed publicly about Israel's continued occupation of Lebanese and Palestinian land, the root cause of much of this nonsense, and an Israeli policy hijacked by generals' overconfidence in Israeli military might.

or

Publicly expressed support for Israel with reservations expressed publicly about the high price paid by civilians in this conflict, even as privately one does not give a damn about Lebanese civilians since every Lebanese (with the exception of fine-cultured, Western-leaning, skiing-in-the-morning-swimming-in-the-afternoon, late-night-partying, designer-

clad, Paris-New York-Berlin-London-São Paolo-hopping, French-speaking-middle-class, upper-middle-class, upper-class, and obscenely wealthy Christians, some Sunnis and Druze) every resident of south Lebanon and the southern suburbs is a martyr-at-heart, a Saddam-Ahmadi Nejad-lovin' - Al-Qaeda financing, seeker-of virgins-in-heaven, Holocaust-denier, rabbit-like-breeder of yet more anti-Semitic terrorists, suicide bombers, Hizbozos who all deserve to die anyway.

VI.

I again follow Jalal Toufic when he writes:

While social scientists, whether sociologists, economists, etc. can provide us with more or less convincing reasons, and mystifiers can grossly nonplus us, valid literature and art provide us with intelligent and subtle incomprehension. One of the main troubles with this world is that, unlike art and literature, it allows only for the gross alternative: Understanding/incomprehension. Contrariwise, art and literature do not provide us with the illusion of comprehending, of grasping, but allow us to keenly not understand, intimating to us that the alternative is not between comprehension and incomprehension, but between incomprehension in a gross manner and while expecting comprehension; and incomprehension in an intelligent and subtle manner.

Given what I have written so far, I suppose that I can benefit from reading this quotation one more time, and from heeding its call for "incomprehension in an intelligent and subtle manner."

VII.

Hot wars and cold wars. What had some artists, scholars, and writers, among others, noted time and again in their works of the past fifteen years? Had they not insisted -- despite the officially sanctioned ends of the wars in Lebanon in the early 1990's, despite the celebratory rebuilding of downtown Beirut, despite the hundreds of gushing articles proclaiming Lebanon's phoenix-like rise and cosmopolitanism -- that Lebanon was in fact in the grip of a cold war? Did they not speak of a militarized south, north, east, and west? Of the rhetoric and logic of the hot wars as still shaping every aspect of contemporary life? Of evident and potentially explosive contradictions everywhere in Lebanon's political, cultural, economic, and social landscape?

Why were so many visual artists, filmmakers, and writers speaking of, writing about, imaging, and performing surpassing disasters, latency, hysterical symptoms, sloth, the repressed and the withdrawn? Did they not already produce the images of cities and villages in ruins even when those cities and villages had been rebuilt? Did they not already speak of, write about, image and perform the destruction evident today in Haret Hreik, Dahiyah, Khiyam, Ainata, Srifa, Qana, Aita al-Shaab, and Rmeish?

Or maybe, we can also say that these artists, writers, sociologists, poets, journalists, filmmakers, and architects have seen nothing in Haret Hreik, Khiyam, Aita al-Shaab, Rmeish, Tyre, Sidon, Ainata, Srifa, Qana, Marjayoun, and dozens of villages in south Lebanon. Surely we can say this as long as this, "I have seen nothing" is consistent with the Japanese man's insistence in the beginning of Hiroshima Mon Amour that his well-meaning and well-informed French lover had seen nothing in Hiroshima, despite the museums and monuments she had visited there, despite the books and films she had consulted, despite the testimonies she had heard.