Lebanon - A Stunning Show of Defiance

As night descended on the ancient city of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, Mayada El-Hennawy, the great Syrian pan-Arab classical musician, began singing, her pronounced voice amplified, then carried towards the mountains that form the border between two sisters: Lebanon and Syria.

Behind Mayada’s back, sits the enormous structure of the Temple of Bacchus, above her, helicopter drones. Tanks and hundreds of soldiers were stationed all over Baalbek, protecting the site and the venue. Just a few kilometers away, Hezbollah is engaged in its epic battle with ISIL.

But thousands of people arrived, in striking defiance, refusing to succumb to fear. They drove here from Beirut and other cities of a battered, now almost dysfunctional Lebanon.

They came to celebrate life and the Arabic culture; they came to listen to their beloved songs and to pay tribute to this celebrated Syrian diva. Some, clearly, came to pay tribute to Syria itself - to Syria and to life.

As Mayada El-Hennawy began singing, people roared.

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The next day, a crowd clashed with Lebanese security forces in the center of Beirut, near the government palace. Dozens were injured and on 24 August, it was reported that one person died in the hospital.

The “You stink” movement first organized the protests. Thousands of people hit the streets in response to an ongoing garbage crisis, which, according to many, has made the already difficult life in Beirut almost unbearable.

But the garbage issue is just a tip of the iceberg. The entire infrastructure of Lebanon is in shambles, with constant power cuts, terrible pollution, water shortages, almost non-existent public transportation, and a awful state of education and health care.

Sectarian to the extreme, the people of Lebanon seem to be unable to unite. Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims and smaller group of Druze defend their own interests, pulling Lebanon in different directions. Some alliances and coalitions exist, but they are not sufficiently strong to guarantee continuity and to enforce stability. For more than one year, the local politicians have been unable to agree even on the President.

“What we want is to get rid of sectarianism”, explained Ahmed, a middle aged Beirut professional, standing in front of the concrete wall erected to prevent protesters from marching on the government building. “No more Christians and Muslims; Just Lebanese! And if we win, then there will be definitely much more socialism here, more social reforms, better health, education, infrastructure.”

But can this group of spontaneous protesters really win against a tremendous inertia? In Lebanon, almost everything
is privatized, almost nothing public. Many cabinet ministers are actually the business people. The country hardly produces anything. It lives from remittances, from shady business in West Africa, from the oil industry in Iraq and elsewhere, from banking and from narcotics that are produced in Bekaa Valley.

“It is still so difficult to imagine how we could win”, admits Ahmed. “We need at least one million people to change the country.”

But the number of angry and determined people is constantly growing.

“We’ve had enough. Enough!” Shouts a man who is carrying a plastic bag filled with garbage as a symbol.

And even the Prime Minister, Tammam Salam, agrees, at least publicly, that things in Lebanon are out of control. He threatened to resign, declaring that he is unwilling to be a partner in the downfall of Lebanon. A crucial government meeting is scheduled for 27 August. If key issues, including garbage collection, are not resolved, Mr. Salam says he is ready to go. He warns that Lebanon is heading towards collapse and that a bigger problem than the trash crisis is the country's "political garbage".

* It appears that the country is heading towards a complete meltdown.

The civil war in neighboring Syria, country destabilized by the West, already sent around 2 million refugees across the Syria-Lebanon border. They are spread all around tiny Lebanon, putting unprecedented strains on the already crumbling infrastructure.

In the north of the country, ISIL (originally supported and armed by NATO states) is trying to establish its own enclave. Hezbollah is fighting ISIL courageously and determinedly. In fact, Hezbollah is the only force in Lebanon, which is providing a social net, while proposing political unity. Hezbollah is Shia Muslim, but it works closely with the Christians and others. Yet, paradoxically, it is on the terrorist list of the United States, mainly because of its determined stand against the state of Israel and its policies in the region.

Israel periodically threatens to attack Lebanon, while the long term Palestinian refugee camps in the south of the country are seeing, recently, some of the worst internal fighting in decades.

To make things worse, government sources claim that the country's public debt currently stands at about 143 percent of gross domestic product, and that next month the salaries of public workers may not be paid.

The country is broke and overwhelmed by regional conflicts.

It is also fully dependent on the outside world. The French are supplying weapons to the Lebanese army but the weapons are paid for by Saudi Arabia.

Huge remittances are the only reason why the country is, until now, still floating.

“There are plenty of foreign interests here”, I am told by a group of demonstrators. “French, the United States, Saudi... We need real independence.”

Hezbollah is close to Iran, while the Sunnis are faithfully linked to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf. The Christians seem to feel aligned with the West more than with the Middle East.

* All the demonstrators that I talk to are fed up, but very few of them can see a way out of the crises.
The situation in the capital is extremely dangerous. “You stink” was supposed to be a peaceful movement. But almost immediately, several political groups sent people who confronted the security forces. Violence erupted. The security forces responded brutally. More than four hundred people were injured so far, and one person died.

Many people went to protest with their little children on their backs and with their grandparents. They thought they are going to engage in discussion with the government. Instead they were welcomed by water cannons, rubber bullets and teargas.

That did not go well with passionate, explosive Lebanese people.

Then a wall was erected, outside the Grand Serail, just to be dismantled next day. Barbed wire is still all over the center of the city. The pavement is dotted with rocks, shop windows broken, cars burned. Tires are burning, blocking main arteries of the city, as this report goes to print.

Security forces are omnipresent, on foot, on board their Humvees and tanks. And so are the ambulances, ready for further escalations.

“Is this a continuation of the Arab Spring?” I asked.

“Yes”, I was told.

Who is behind this uprising?

Everyone at the protest site claims that the rebellion is absolutely spontaneous, that there is no foreign influence.

“Revolution!” protesters are shouting, repeatedly.

“This is not like those color revolutions,” I am told. A protester is referring to the West’s-backed movements paid to perform the “regime-changes” all over the world. “Here, we are on our own. We want a united, free and better Lebanon!”

The next few days will be crucial, and extremely dangerous. The protesters have guts, while the Lebanese establishment is desperate.

This long suffering country, Lebanon is once again entering extremely dangerous period.

Its economy may be dead and its rulers corrupt, but the Lebanese people are determined and defiant. It seems that they want their beautiful country back; soon, if possible now!

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