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THE CITY AND THE MOUNTAIN: BEIRUT'S POLITICAL RADIUS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AS REVEALED IN THE CRISIS OF 1860

In the course of the nineteenth century, the relationship between Beirut and Mount Lebanon underwent important changes that have affected Lebanon's political life up to the present day. The city and the countryside had always been to some extent mutually dependent. They became more closely tied in response to the economic and political transformation of the region in the age of European penetration. This growing interdependence increasingly took the form of Beirut's ascendancy over the Mountain. While in earlier centuries it was the Mountain which had extended its sway over the city, in the nineteenth century the process was reversed. But Beirut's triumph as the dominant partner in the relationship was not an unmixed blessing: While bringing prosperity to the city, it also transferred to Beirut many of the unresolved tensions of the Mountain, preparing the way for the city's sectarian rivalries and tensions in more recent times.¹

The transfer of influence and responsibility from Mountain to city went through several stages, of which the civil war that engulfed the Mountain in May and June, and Damascus in July of 1860 was the most important. This conflict was a result of decades of tension, and included a struggle, in 1857, between the peasants and lords of the Maronite north which spread to the mixed districts of the south as hostilities broke out between Christians and Druzes. Next the disturbances spread to Damascus, where Sunni Muslims attacked the Christian (primarily Greek Orthodox) part of town. The circumstances behind the disturbances in the Mountain and those in Damascus were very different, but they all reflected a displacement of traditionally privileged groups by new centers of wealth and power. In Mount Lebanon, the changes included the break-up of the feudal economy and the loss of numerical and economic balance between Maronite and Druze communities – in favor of the Maronites. In Damascus, they included the more general problem of the weakening Ottoman power in the face of European hegemony, and the threats that weakness posed to the traditionally privileged Sunni groups. Indeed, the economic and political changes the empire underwent in the nineteenth century were so fundamental and the challenges to Ottoman society so profound that one wonders, not why the civil war occurred, but why conflict was not more common and did not erupt more often.

It is also puzzling that in Beirut virtually no violence occurred. After all, its thriving port exemplified more than any other part of Syria the growth of European economic and political influence and the rise of new commercial classes associated with the trade with the West. Yet Beirut escaped the conflicts that broke out in the hinterland and elsewhere along the Syrian coast.

Two explanations can be offered for Beirut's avoidance of bloodshed in 1860. One is that European authority was strong there. Also, Ottoman influence continued to be relatively strong, as it had been since the restoration of Ottoman rule in Syria after the Egyptian occupation, when the center of political gravity of local and foreign powers was moved northward along the Syrian coast to Beirut. The power of the Ottoman authorities and the European consuls therefore remained in balance in Beirut, as it did not in Damascus or in any of the smaller Syrian towns. A mutual lack of sympathy and confidence kept the Ottomans and Europeans in check and on their guard, and may have helped prevent the deterioration of the political situation in Beirut after civil war broke out. The consuls saw to it that European warships were kept in the harbor throughout that period of strife and even after calm was restored.

Beirut's people played their part as well. Like the inhabitants of most trading centers, they realized that financial and commercial interests would not flourish during domestic strife. Moreover, they were accustomed to overlooking religious and ethnic differences when it came to business. Beirut's original population – mostly Sunni Muslims and Greek Orthodox Christians – had coexisted for centuries. By the 1850s, immigrants from the surrounding areas had moved in, but the city remained a community able to place its economic interests above its sectarian allegiances. The tensions in the regions surrounding Beirut affected it seriously, but reason prevailed. Restraint became more difficult to exercise after the disturbances of 1860, when the number of migrants from the Mountain also increased, bringing with them the attitudes of mountain communities less used to compromise and coexistence than the urban mercantile population of Beirut. The sectarian distrust unleashed by the events of 1860 and its transfer to Beirut through immigration marks a turning point in the city's social history from harmony between communities to growing mistrust.

Beirut's involvement in the affairs of the Mountain was a process that had begun at the turn of the nineteenth century when its proximity to the area under the jurisdiction of the Shihab prince Bashīr II in the Mountain made it more secure than the other coastal cities under the tyrannical rule of Aḥmad Pāsha al-Jazzār.² Bashīr II's protection had economic strings tied to it. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the economy of the Mountain changed from a feudal to a cash crop system. Beirut merchants loaned out money to peasants, thus providing an alternative to feudal dependence on their mountain lords, but at the same time contributing to the growing specialization of agriculture in the Mountain, the development of a handicraft economy, and subsequent rise of regional trading market towns.³

The political and administrative changes that accompanied the restoration of Ottoman rule over Syria in 1840 added another dimension to the city's growing involvement with the Mountain. Under the Egyptians, Beirut had become an

administrative and consular center. Under the Ottomans after 1840, its position was consolidated. Insofar as the city's relations with the Mountain were concerned, two opposite processes took place: the weakening of the Mountain and the strengthening of Beirut politically. The weakening and demise of the Shihāb principedom after the departure of the Egyptians and the consequent reorganization of the Mountain by the Ottomans in 1842 created two decades of trouble in the Mountain where administrative inefficiency, economic pressures and sectarian tensions increasingly involved the Mountain with Beirut. Administrative reorganization of the Mountain and of Beirut put Beirut in a position to monitor events in the Mountain, where the solutions found to alleviate the tensions had failed to end unrest. Beirut and the Mountain remained in separate jurisdictions, but unrest in the latter caused groups in Beirut to become increasingly involved in the Mountain.

Ottoman and European officials interfered with the affairs of the Mountain, as did private interest groups in Beirut. Maronite Bishop Ṭūbiyya ʿAwn, for example, made famous by his involvement in the events of 1860, was already active in the affairs of the Mountain in the 1840s and 1850s.⁴ At the same time, the administrative weakness of the Mountain pushed its inhabitants to come to Beirut to petition Ottomans and consuls alike to resolve their various differences. The Mountain may have been outside the jurisdiction of Beirut but the strings of its politics were being pulled more and more often from the city.

Beirut's influence over the Mountain continued to be felt after the administrative reorganization of the Mountain in the aftermath of the civil war of 1860. Stability and peace returned to the Mountain and interference by Beirut groups into the affairs of the Mountain diminished. But by then, Beirut's economic influence on the Mountain was entrenched, especially among the Christian population, since it was from that group that the Beirut migrants were largely drawn. By 1888, when Beirut's ascendancy was recognized in the creation of a vilayet by its name, the city had truly become the heart of the economic and cultural life of Mount Lebanon.⁵

It is in the light of this evolving relationship of Mountain and city that the events of 1860 must be understood. Beirut's growing involvement with the Mountain was a long-term process stretching throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, although Beirut's ascendancy over the Mountain began before 1860 and continued after that date, the events of the civil war constituted a turning point: on the one hand, they illustrated dramatically Beirut's political ascendancy and, on the other hand, they set into full motion the price the city paid for it.

Among the contributory causes to the worsening of the situation in the Mountain were the negligence of Ottoman officials and foreign intrigues, or such is the impression left by contemporaries, whose attitudes admittedly may have been influenced by prejudice and self-interest. The European consuls suspected the Ottoman administration of sympathizing with the Druzes and Muslims and encouraging their attacks on Christians, while the Ottomans accused the European consuls of inciting Christian feelings in the Mountain, an accusation directed specifically at the French after the landing of French troops in Beirut in August 1860, in the wake of the civil war. What one is to deduce from all these

mutual suspicions and accusations requires further careful examination, but it is at least possible to say that, whether justified or not, the fact that such suspicions and accusations existed suggests that Ottomans and Europeans both believed the other had the power to orchestrate events.⁶

Other groups among the Beirut population did their part in fomenting trouble, either indirectly – by spreading rumors and feeding doubts – or directly, by organizing themselves to assist co-religionists and resist the rival groups. We know of one such group, the Maronite Young Men's League organized in 1860 by Bishop ʿAwn and active against the Druzes in the Mountain, but its exact role, as well as that of others, remains to be determined.⁷ It is undeniable, however, that among the Christians of Beirut, many fought alongside co-religionists in the troubled districts.⁸

In 1860, once the seriousness of the disturbances had become obvious, Beirut's political influence was exercised mostly in an effort to contain the situation and prevent it from getting even further out of hand. In particular, the foreign consuls in Beirut exerted tremendous pressure on the Ottoman government – either in the city or through their ambassadors in Istanbul – to help put a stop to the bloodshed and massacre of Christians in the Mountain and the interior. The presence of European warships in Beirut's harbor was one of the more visible ways in which pressure was applied. There were others, ranging all the way from the organization of an Anglo-American Relief Committee to the landing of a French expeditionary force in Syria. In all these activities, Beirut played a pivotal role as the central point of origin of consular influence and organization. None of the groups that comprised the Syrian population could fail to take note that power had passed from the Ottomans to the Europeans.

Even when the Ottoman government swiftly and decisively stepped in to end the crisis, dust was not thrown in Syrian eyes. The Ottoman government took firm steps to punish the Druze and Muslim culprits, thanks largely to the initiative of Fuād Pāsha. But even that signaled to the population that something had changed, that minorities had more political backing than ever before. Although the sympathy of Ottoman officials may have been on the side of the Muslims and the Druzes – if only out of exasperation at European interference on the side of the Christians – they enforced the terms of the agreement reached with the European powers in Istanbul. Either way the Ottomans suffered from the Syrian internecine fighting: damned if they interfered and damned if they did nothing. Correspondence of Ottoman officials reveals their exasperation at European involvement in the affairs of Syria in 1860 and at the Europeans' conviction that the Ottoman authorities were not really trying to solve the crisis. One official even rejoiced when two Druzes, who had been found guilty for their role in the massacres of 1860, escaped while under the guard of French soldiers, and expressed the hope that the Europeans would henceforth desist from their accusations that Ottomans were incapable of guarding their own prisoners.⁹

Whatever Ottoman-European rivalries developed in dealing with the crisis of 1860, Beirut became the main theater of their activities, another illustration of the city's political role. While the authorities in Damascus – an old and prestigious Muslim and Ottoman center – did nothing to stop the outbreak of hostilities

in their city in July 1860, Beirut became the center of operations of Fuād Pāsha and the International Commission he headed to stop the war. The Commission later moved its headquarters to Istanbul, but in the meantime Beirut had come to prominence as the center of operations.

As Beirut became the destination of refugees fleeing the troubled areas in the hinterland, both Ottoman and European authorities began to worry at the scale both of the exodus from the countryside and of the influx into Beirut. They issued repeated warnings to discourage further immigration and tried to convince the inhabitants of the troubled areas to stay where they were by a variety of measures, including the trial and public punishment of those found guilty of sedition. Some were sentenced to death, some imprisoned, some sent into exile, depending on the gravity of their crimes. But the local populations apparently remained unconvinced. The Christians feared reprisals, those in Damascus after the departure from Syria of Fuād Pāsha and those of the Mountain after the departure of French troops. The result was that despite Ottoman and consular entreaties unrest continued. The Christians repeatedly expressed to European consuls and French troops their fears that new massacres would take place.¹⁰ Rumors of alleged sectarian outbreaks circulated for years after the civil war had ended. Some of this unrest resulted from fears unleashed by the civil war; some of it may have been engineered by groups opposed to the government or with other ulterior motives. Ottoman officials, for example, clearly suspected European consuls and local Christian groups of intentionally sabotaging the return of order and confidence that would stop the flight of refugees to Beirut. They accused the French consulate in Damascus of distributing money to Christians who expressed the wish to come to Beirut, and the reported case of a Beiruti Christian who marked the doors of Christian houses with the sign of the cross to mislead them into believing a Muslim attack on Christians was imminent.¹¹

European consuls, on their part, distrusted the local Muslim and Druze populations of Damascus and the Mountain as well as the Ottomans. Although both British and French consuls reported harassment of Christians in the hinterland, the landing of the French expeditionary force in Syria gave the British second thoughts. The presence in the area of French troops forced the British closer to the Ottoman position. Both accused the French of stirring up the Christian population in an effort to make the French presence indispensable.

Whether genuine or instigated, the fears of the Christian population proved hard to allay, and Christians continued to come to Beirut for years. The first immigrants also attracted family members left behind, thus adding to the numbers. Job opportunities in Beirut, which had been spared the destruction and economic losses suffered elsewhere, was another incentive, not only to attract immigrants but to keep them there too.

Migration did, however, help to diffuse tensions in the troubled areas, since the departure of the Christian population removed the immediate cause of tension. The calm and stability in Mount Lebanon after its administrative reorganization in 1861 may well be due in part to the safety valve Beirut provided.

In Beirut, however, the presence of the refugees ended the equilibrium that had prevailed there. There were two reasons. First, the very presence of refugees

naturally led to the growth of communal mistrust between them and the Muslim population. Hostility in the city was exacerbated by the arrival of a continuous stream of Christians suffering from persecution by Druzes or Muslims and bringing with them the prejudices it had engendered. At the same time, their presence was a reminder to the Druzes and the more numerous Sunnis of Beirut that the Muslim population of Beirut had not taken an active part in the civil war (a riot was the closest Beirut had come to open conflict in 1860), and had in fact helped the refugees. But in subsequent months they, just as the Christians of Beirut, had grown increasingly bitter, especially over the harshness – as it seemed to them – of the punishment meted out to Muslim insurgents and the open support of the Christians by the Europeans.¹²

The dramatic growth of the proportion of Christians in the city's population tipped the scale in their favor and that ascendancy in turn allowed them to control the wealth of the city in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Beirut continued to be the center of the Ottoman administration, and the old and proud Muslim families accustomed to political influence remained there. The mutual rivalries that resulted were never resolved. In the twentieth century, further political and administrative changes, first under the French and then after independence, preserved a fragile sectarian peace, but as recent history shows, it left the field wide open to further conflict.

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NOTES

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¹Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *Migrants and Merchants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

²Dominique Chevallier, *La société du Mont Liban à l'époque de la révolution industrielle en Europe* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1971), p. 185, etc.; Kamal S. Salibi, *The Modern History of Lebanon* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1965).

³I. M. Smiliyanskaya, "Razlohenie fedalnikh otonoshenii v Sirii i Livane v Seredine XIXV." (The Disintegration of Feudal Relations in Syria and Lebanon in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century), trans. in Charles Issawi, ed., *Economic History of the Middle East, 1800–1914: A Book of Readings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 227–247; I. M. Smiliyanskaya, *al-Ḥarakāt al-fallāḥiyya fī Lubnān*, trans. Adnān Jāmūs, ed. Salīm Yūsuf (Beirut: Dār al-Farābī, 1972); Paul Saba, "The Creation of the Lebanese Economy: Economic Growth in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Essays on the Crisis in Lebanon*, ed. Roger Owen (London: Ithaca Press, 1976), pp. 1–22.

⁴For example, *F.O. 226/96*, Rose-Cowley, 30–7–1847.

⁵Albert Hourani, "Lebanon: the Development of a Political Society," *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1981), pp. 124–141; Hourani, "Lebanon from Feudalism to Nation-State," *ibid.*, pp. 142–148; Hourani, "Ideologies of the Mountain and the City: Reflections on the Lebanese Civil War," *ibid.*, pp. 17–178.

⁶I am in the process of researching the civil war of 1860 and until I finish, can only offer my conclusions as tentative.

⁷Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut*, p. 171, n. 26.

⁸*F.O. 195/655*, Moore-Russell, No. 9, 24–5–1860; *ibid.*, no. 23, 30–5–1860; *F.O. 195/658*, inclosure in Dufferin-Bulwer, no. 130, 7–3–1861.

⁹University of Jordan, Center for Documents and Manuscripts. Abro-Cabouly, 24–3–1861. I would like to thank Dr. Adnan Bakhit for generously putting at my disposal the Center's collection from the Ottoman archives in Istanbul.

¹⁰Vincennes, Archives Militaires. *Dossier G4*, I, Beaufort-Rondon, no. 55, 7–6–1861 and other correspondence, *A.E Correspondence Politique*, Turquie, Beyrout, vol. 13, Bentivoglio-Thouvenel, no. 86, 19–4–1861 and other correspondence.

¹¹University of Jordan, Center for Documents and Manuscripts. Abro-Cabouly, 19–3–1861; *ibid.*, Abro-Cabouly, 24–3–1861.

¹²On the mutual fear of Beirut Christians and Muslims in 1860, consult, for example, *F.O. 195/655*, Moore-Bulwer, no. 33, 9–6–1860; *ibid.*, Moore-Bulwer, no. 19, 5–7–1860; *ibid.*, Moore-Bulwer, no. 41, 26–6–1860; *ibid.*, Moore-Russell, no. 35, 22–7–1860; *ibid.*, Moore-Russell, no. 20, 13–7–1860; U.S. Consul in Beirut, 1836–1906, vol. 3, Johnson-Grass, 8–6–1860; *ibid.*, Johnson-Secretary of State, no. 2, 7–6–1860 and inclosure; *ibid.*, Johnson-Secretary of State, 9–6–1860; *ibid.*, Johnson-Cass, 14–7–1860.