

***[Introduction] [10']***

Good afternoon,

Thank you Jon and Counterpoint for this opportunity to bring the Lebanese case into perspective today and hopefully be able to apply to it many of the experiences and conclusions kindly shared by you all throughout the day and in last September's conference.

Lebanon is a country that has long endured the sufferings (and fruits) of its religious and sectarian diversity. With a fragile confessional political system and with a number of bloody wars marring its recent history – considered civil wars by some, and anything but civil by others, the aim of this panel today is really threefold:

1) to delineate – as accurately as possible – the actual fault lines that exist within the Lebanese polity, with all their internal, regional, and international flavors, (i.e. Muslim vs. Christian, Arabism vs. Lebanism, East vs. West, etc...)

2) to share with you past reconciliation and conflict resolution efforts that have taken place in Lebanon, while specifically focusing on experiences from artistic initiatives, namely those undertaken by our panelists, and

3) to think forward together about what can be further done to blur those fault lines and whether the arts can serve a constructive role here, namely Counterpoint which is scheduled to go on a music tour in Lebanon the very near future, I believe

For those of you who were able to attend last year's panel on Lebanon and listen to many of the theoretical or philosophical takes on the conflict in Lebanon, on the concepts of 'identity' and the 'other', there will be a significant shift today towards more of a 'applicative' and 'pragmatic' approach in the overall discussion. Even the format will

take less the form of separate speeches or talks by each panelist, but more of an interactive Q&A discussion among the panelists themselves and between the panel and the audience.

Allow me to start by introducing our fellow panelists...

**Firas Abi-Nassif** is a founding engineer at Airvana, Inc., a leading Cellular Infrastructure equipment vendor, and is pursuing his MBA degree at the Harvard Business School. Born in Lebanon at the outset of the Lebanese war, he graduated in 1996 with a Bachelor's degree in Computer and Communications Engineering from the American University of Beirut. He then obtained his Master's degree in Telecommunications Engineering from Northeastern University in 1998. Working at Motorola research between 1997 and 2000, he has patented five international inventions in the field of Data Networks and produced several publications in that field. An advocate of religious and political toleration, Firas has developed an extracurricular career in free-lance journalism and is currently a columnist on Lebanese and Middle East politics for Profile News, a Massachusetts-based newspaper.

Firas will really be giving us the necessary historical background on the Lebanese case to understand the roots of conflict, starting all the way from the 1920's and Lebanon's creation, passing through the 15-year Lebanese War, to the current day events, late PM Hariri's assassination and the Syrian withdrawal.

**Michel ElAshkar** is an actor, dramatist, producer, and engineer. Born in Zahle, Lebanon, Michel immigrated to the United States in 1983 and graduated as a Civil Engineer from the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. He founded ASHKAR Consulting Group, a civil engineering and land surveying firm in 1989 and became member of the board of Surveyors in the state of Massachusetts in 1996. Hailing from a family of artists, his passion for poetry, writing, and acting culminated in his internationally acclaimed monodrama, "A Child of Life", a theatrical interpretation of 2 acts chronicling many of the highlights of Lebanese-American poet and artist

Kahlil Gibran's life. A Child of Life, performed to standing ovations in many world capitals, has received a number of international awards and "Kahlil Gibran Day" proclamations from the mayors of nine U.S. cities since its debut in 1999. In January 2003, Al-Jazeera network ran an exclusive documentary highlighting Michel's artistic contribution as an Arab-American. In 2001, Michel formed ASHKARVISION, a production company with the objective of preserving Lebanese artistic heritage. Its current productions range from instrumental music to old Lebanese folk songs to an array of Christian Maronite and Byzantine Hymns.

Michel will share with us his journey as an artist working hard to manifest a message of Lebanese unity and tolerance in his works and the experiences they evoked among his diverse audiences

**Christiane Karam** is an award-winning Singer/Songwriter (First Prize Winner, 2001 USA Songwriting Competition/World Category, Finalist, 2003 John Lennon Songwriting Contest/Electronic Category, and SESAC Award recipient, among others). She has performed with the likes of Bulgarian legend Yanka Rupkina and pianist/composer Ran Blake, and has been featured on VH1. Her teachers include Simon Shaheen, Dominique Eade, and Bobby McFerrin. She is currently attending a Masters Degree Program at the New England Conservatory where she was recently named the 2004-2005 Kimball Stickney Scholar.

Christian will tell us more about ZilZALA's attempts at drawing from several musical cultures to re-interpret classical, traditional and folk Arabic Music.

I'll now leave the floor to Mr. Abi-Nassif and the historical overview of the Lebanese case...

*[Firas presentation] [30']*

Thanks Firas. By the way, it's worth mentioning that in Firas' case, it took almost 15 years for him to first cross the Green Line into West Beirut, and hence see for the first time AUB, where he would pursue his education between 1992 and 1996. It was also 15 years before he was able to visit his ancestral village for the first time!

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*[Loai summarizing] [10']*

I would just like to draw your attention to a few observations I believe one should take from this previous overview, that are somewhat very peculiar to the Lebanese case:

1. Usually, conflicts or wars end with winners and vanquished, with a revolution, with an occupation, with major changes in the political system, in the power-sharing formula... or anything to at least justify the reason to and cost of the war. The Lebanese War, however, was this long, this bloody, and this destructive, yet ended with almost no winners nor losers (or all were losers basically, given the loss of the country), nor did it end with a significant political change (minor ration adjustment from 6-to-5 to 1-to-1 representation between Muslims and Christians in parliament and the devolution of power into a Troika of leaders)
2. That it almost ended with every imaginable combination of alliances and shifting of alliances during the 15 years of the war. That is, the war ended with almost every 2 enemies being allies at some point and vice versa. Except maybe for that Palestinians never sided with the Israelis throughout the war perhaps. Rarely has a war been as complex and as opportunistic in terms of the roles and relationships of the various militants groups, involving almost 40 foreign armies and local militias fighting in a sectarian Lebanon with ever-shifting alliances and interests.
3. Almost no consensus whatsoever exists between participants on the history, justification for, or mere definition of the war. Mind you, I'm not saying they're disagreeing on the accountabilities or who was wrong/right, who was a victim, etc... but on the actual definition of the war as being Civil between Christians and Muslims, as solely the Palestinians' responsibility, as an extension of the Cold War, as a warehouse for the differences of Arab countries (Iranian-Iraqi War, Gulf War, etc...)

4. Although Taef agreement ended the war, it did so by ironically reestablishing the same political organization without attending to the historical inconsistencies of Lebanese democracy. Instead of addressing the fault lines at the core of Lebanese society, it basically reinforced and even crystallized them. Also, this balance of power was built to maintain peace between people, and not to encourage them towards economic, political, or social development. At best, it would succeed in containing the sectarian predicament and remains very far from solving it.
5. Finally, Taef didn't really reconcile the people or bridge the fault lines. It only reconciled the warlords and party leader. The people stopped fighting because their leaders ordered them to. The population remains at large unreconciled, if we assume it was they who were at war in reality and hence need to be **reconciled**.

For the sake of this discussion, let us define reconciliation as the umbrella process starting with: conflict management, encounter -> communicate/dialogue, trust building, dispute resolution (since you trust who you are disputing with), once resolved and common knowledge/perception -> then public education.

### **Unity through focusing on what we share and putting aside the difference**

What I realized unifies the Lebanese is an extreme mutual emotion directed towards an external entity or event for which no one specific sect can solely claim credit (if favorable) or is solely held accountable (if unfavorable):

- 1) Pride:
  - a. Gibran, Fairouz, Marcel Khalife, Ziad Rahbani, Amir Fakhreddine
  - b. vs. Saïid Akl, Fadlallah
- 2) Happiness/content:

- a. Economic prosperity of the 60s that can't be credited to one sect
- b. vs. the half-hearted happiness with Hizbollah (Shiite) getting the Israelis out

3) Hatred:

- a. Anger at Hariri's loss; hatred towards Syria
- b. vs. Hatred towards the US

Come to the **war itself... extreme mutual hatred towards war, no credit/accountability, externalization of war causes** hence:

It took us from being communities bound by the mutual understanding that other communities can not be trusted to communities who have relatively (or more than before at least) 'known each other' through engaging in this bloody conflict; massive losses on both sides; leaving them with a country to rebuild together; and be maintained and protected by all – Hence a new Lebanese identity started emerging; the externalization of the reasons behind the war (i.e blaming on Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian war, the Cold War, etc... ) was a unifying factor.

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Focusing on the above commonalities only involves forgetting differences (treat as if does not exist) and focusing on what is in common. For strategic reasons, we're not starting by putting our fingers on the wounds. This at least breeds interaction and familiarity (with the other and ideologies of the other). By knowing the other, there becomes a 'cost of upsetting the other'; i.e. cost of ruining the relationship, no matter how new or weak it is.... Without knowing the other, cost of breaking it is 0, hence you may not think twice before doing so. Like a car accident with a stranger vs. a neighbor you barely met the night before (not to mention a girl you have a crush on, where you may be willing to forget the whole accident!) – When there is sufficient familiarity, then there is tolerance. At this stage, we should start acknowledging and discussing differences (because we can) and in fact rise to the understanding that capitalizing on such differences would result in a rich, multifaceted, and heterogeneous society.

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## **Past Efforts**

In 1999, the Washington DC-based NGO, IWA (Institute of World Affairs) launched a Postwar Community Building Project in Mt. Lebanon region near Beirut, in mostly Christian and Druze villages. The purpose of the project is to deal with the emotions and memories left from the war that have kept refugees from returning and the communities from moving forward.

I want to share with you some of the response from the organizers and people involved in the project... [*go to quotes*]

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**Beatitudes of Reconciliation**

Blessed are those who are willing to enter into the process of being healed, for they will become healers.

Blessed are they who recognize their own inner violence, for they will come to know non-violence.

Blessed are those who are willing to enter into conflict, for they will find transformation.

Blessed are those who know their interdependence with all of creation, for they will become unifiers.

Blessed are those who strive to live these beatitudes, for they will be reconcilers.

*Sisters of St. Joseph, Concordia, Kansas*

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**Interventions** (speech by Brian Starken)

In helping to identify possible interventions, particularly at the micro level, we could consider some of the following options. This is not an exhaustive list nor is it prioritized. They are some examples of ‘reconciliation’ activities that have been successfully implemented in various conflict situations.

- ✓ Can we create ‘space’ for victims and victimizers to tell their story?
- ✓ Can we empower people to make peace?
- ✓ Can we provide a training capacity for community leaders/animators or traditional reconcilers?
- ✓ Can we identify and strengthen reconciliation mechanisms that already exist in local culture?
- ✓ Can we take initiatives or motivate other parties to take initiatives for reconciliation?
- ✓ Can we initiate education/sensitization programs (e.g. using the media)?
- ✓ Can we mediate?
- ✓ Can we introduce conflict prevention activities?
- ✓ Can we work withy victims/marginalized/traumatized?
- ✓ Can we advocate greater access to justice for victims?
- ✓ Can we advocate for political change?
- ✓ Can we identify partners with whom we can work?
- ✓ How can we strengthen our own capacity for intervention?

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## Suggestion for Counterpoint

- 1- Orchestra or group of musicians would be of Westerners
  - a. First, you have the East vs. West theme manifested in Western musicians
  - b. Lebanon is known for its openness and extreme hospitality towards foreigners, especially Westerners and especially when they come without their weapons and show appreciation for the local music
  - c. Especially when they take the role of arbitrators; i.e. neutral judges and moderators of the people's stories... having them let out what they have to say
- 2- They would play Fairouz songs and/or Ziad music, or whatever is deemed suitable yet is readily recognizable by the people
  - a. All sects of Lebanon enjoy and are united by Fairouz' music; in itself is a unifying factor
- 3- 'Reconciliation' or dialogue session would alternate with musical sessions
  - a. Music would provide this same 'agreeable' or 'soothing' atmosphere for discussion and meditation
- 4- Trail of music-seminar; starts in Beirut (neutral) and then starts touring in 'extreme' locations (predominantly Christian or Muslim)
  - a. In Bika' or South Lebanon -> Take them to Kaslik
  - b. Idea is in recruiting supporters and audience from one area to come with you to the next extreme

*[Michel Q&A] [20']*

- 1- So when you made this decision to consider a career in theatre alongside engineering, did you face trouble being an Arab or from the Middle East entering this profession and what made you choose a Middle Eastern character as the subject of your first play? Gibran, in this case.
  
  - 2- I've had the privilege to watch and thoroughly enjoy *A Child of Life*. I felt you made the effort to mix Christian and Muslim (and also Eastern and Western) themes or lifestyles in your portrayal of Gibran. Even the wardrobe (a Western tuxedo and a Muslim/Arabian abayah; Arabic coffee and wine, etc...) – Were those intentionally added to emphasize this unity or universality theme of the whole work? And did that demand any distortion or concealment of the facts in writing the script?
  
  - 3- What response did it evoke among your diverse audiences, especially along sectarian lines? Was it unanimously applauded? Did anyone feel that Gibran is their sect to claim and felt you distorted the reality of matters?
  
  - 4- Do you believe in the capacity of art and music in deepening dialogue? What practical steps or projects can be taken towards this end?
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*[Christian Q&A] [10']*

- 1- Tell us some more about ZilZALA: What was the initial ambition and did the reality of matters or tastes latter on affect that and force your work in other directions? As in, what emotions and response did it evoke in the various worlds or among the different cultures it meant to combine?
  
  - 2- Given that Counterpoint's mission in Lebanon will be through music, what are your practical recommendation(s) for things they should do or consider that would aid them on their mission of transforming conflict and deepening interfaith dialogue?
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*[Floor discussion] [...]*