Chapter 5

Broken and Forfeited Bonds to the Land

Nowhere as much as in this tormented Orient, beset with false prophets of earthly kingdoms and martyrs’ heavens, has the land been an inseparable part of body and soul. The relation of oriental peoples to the land is an existential one. It is woven with their religious beliefs and spirituality. And yet, nowhere else are these bonds more tried on a daily basis, dismantled, hacked away at by the realities of today and the qualms of tomorrow.

Wars are waged in the name of land and in the name of land peoples are thrown away in packs from their home, and they become labeled as “displaced,” and those who leave—forced or by free will—become the “émigrés” who carry fragments of the land in their dreams and are still, for those who stayed, their extension overseas. Displaced people and émigrés keep with their land bonds that are physically broken or distended to the point of engendering forfeited rights.

THE ÉMIGRÉS: A POLITICAL STAKE

Despite its geographical and climatic diversity, tiny Lebanon is a country of emigration. Lebanese have always been a nation of travelers. Once again, estimates vary between 16 million émigrés of Lebanese descent and 4 million. But they all agree on the fact that Christians amount to between 65 percent and 70 percent, among whom Maronites alone represent roughly 48 percent of this diaspora, and are thus the largest “Lebanese” community abroad.

This is one major reason why the Maronite political elite has conferred the emigration “file” to be of inordinate importance. Since figures are the

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invisible fuel of the Lebanese political engine, one way of tipping the balance would be to outstretch the boundaries of Lebanon and (re-)inject the émigrés into political life! Thus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had become the “Ministry of the Emigrants” and in the sixties, the “World Lebanese Cultural Union” was founded in order to create an official link with the Lebanese diaspora. Since the early twenties, the Christian ruling class strongly defended the idea of incorporating the Lebanese émigrés in the national census and giving them the voting rights. Some would go as far as defending the idea of granting them seats in Parliament.

Soon, the Shiite community entered the “contest” and, armed with the same logic, animated a Shiite trend within the Union (evolving mainly around its émigrés in Africa,¹ as opposed to the Maronites who were spread in the Americas). This ultimately led to divisions within the Union, which split to various branches, each one having its own political and confessional agenda. In the early nineties, Maronites created a couple of institutes in the United States, organized the first “World Maronite Conference” in Los Angeles (1994), and animated a set of social and cultural networks. The Druzes decided they, too, should move along and so they established the Young Druze Professionals Association in 1995, in the United States.

In April 1993, and under the impulse of Speaker of Parliament and head of the Shiite movement “Amal,” Nabih Berri, the “Ministry of Emigrés” became an autonomous portfolio, although its attributions and the mechanisms of coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were not clearly defined. Since 1991, the émigrés became pretty much a central theme of Lebanese politics. Secular as well as religious leaders of all levels and affiliations have been visiting various countries where “Lebanese” and their descendants have a strong and active presence, starting with Brazil, to Argentina, Mexico, the United States, Canada, European countries such as France, Germany, and also Australia, without forgetting the African countries. During these visits, which captured wide media coverage, they all stressed the necessity of granting the émigrés Lebanese nationality. This proposition would become a political leitmotiv for Shiites, Druzes, and Maronites, after having been, for decades, an exclusively Maronite tune. Now that the other communities were having large colonies abroad, they were espousing the idea of adding them up to their number and thus gaining more political weight. The “émigrés” theme became a bargaining sectarian card in the local political arena.

But how deep was their relation with their “old country,” folklore and emotions put aside? Could they still be considered as Lebanese, especially those of the second and third generations? Was the “emigration dossier”