

Interview with Charbel el-Khoury

On Lebanon, Syria, and the Secret Police

Charbel el-Khoury is a political exile from Lebanon, He teaches Arabic at Columbia College, and as a private tutor. But much of his time is devoted to writing for international press bureaus in French and in Arabic, as well as the Lebanese Press Syndicate. While in Lebanon in 1974 and 1975, he covered local news before moving to Iran to work on magazines in Tehran, covering the Lebanese Civil War from an international perspective. Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon last year has by no means slowed his efforts. He is currently planning an Arabic-English publication to address religious and ethnic relations in the region.

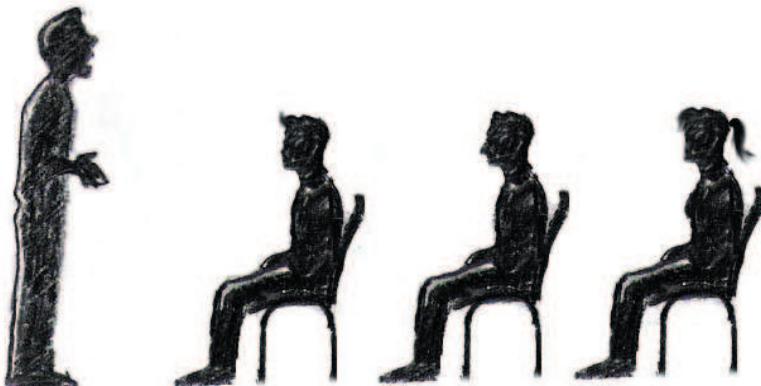
THE BLUE AND WHITE: When did you leave Lebanon, and what were your reasons at the time?

CHARBEL EL-KHOURY: I left Lebanon in 2001, for political reasons. It would not have been safe to stay there. In fact, because I used to lecture and write articles against the Syrian occupation, they took me to jail several times. The last time, they threatened and tortured me. I received a lot of threats on my cellphone, which I believe were from Hezbollah, claiming that I was a foreign agent of some secret service—which is not true. If I was, I would work for them—not for Columbia University! But everyone who was against the Syrian occupation would be called agents of Israel, agents of Mossad, because in the Arab world this is the easiest way to discredit someone. If you are a competitor in politics, in any field, they would call you an agent of Israel and make you disappear from this world. Most of these people never have a connection to any of these agencies, but they are taken to prison.

B&W: What do you feel were the root causes of the Lebanese Civil War?

CK: In Lebanon, there are Christians and Muslims. They used to live together, but the Muslims had a way of life and the Christians also had theirs, which was very European, very Western. Historically, the Christians built Lebanon, not the Muslims. This is not a fanatical opinion. But the two existed in parallel. However, when the Palestinians moved from Jordan after 1970, they moved to Lebanon. That is to say that the Fedayeen and the Syrians let them move through their land, pushed them to go to Lebanon because they had prepared a plan to collapse the Lebanese state, because there were, in history, a lot of problems between Syria and Lebanon.

The war began because the Palestinians wanted to make trouble, and to make war against Israel from the south, along the border. During this time, we didn't want to have problems with Israel. From 1948 to 1970, there was no trouble between Lebanon and Israel. But when the Palestinians came, the problems began. This was the reason for the war. The Christians began to defend themselves when they felt that the Palestinians and the Syrians wanted to destroy the government, the economy, everything in Lebanon. During the war, they used to collect people from Bangladesh



Illustrated by Jerone Hsu

and send them to Lebanon, told them “You are going to fight Israel,” and they fought in Lebanon—against the Christians! Really, they want to destroy Christianity as a way of life. I’m not a fanatic, but they’re going to destroy it in the Middle East. I think that only in Lebanon and Israel can you find a Western way of life.

B&W: So, do you place the fault of the civil war on the Syrian government, or on the Palestinian refugees in the country?

CK: If you know [former Syrian President] ‘Assad, if you have an idea about him, he was a devil, or evil—I don’t know what you prefer in politics. He established a secret service in Syria that was worse than the regime in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. He wanted to be the leader of the entire Middle East, so the Syrians began to prepare for the war in 1969. In 1972, there were some problems between the Palestinian forces and the Lebanese army. When the Lebanese army surrounded the Palestinian military base, ‘Assad closed the border between Syria and Lebanon, which is very important to the Lebanese economy. He said to the President of Lebanon, “If you don’t withdraw from this place, I will never reopen the border.”

B&W: The protests against Syrian occupation last year got a lot of attention in the U.S. press, and the general population here seems to believe that Syria has completely left Lebanon. Would you say that the situation is as simple as that?

CK: Well, the army withdrew from Lebanon. But, in fact, the Mukhabarat, the secret service, is operating inside Lebanon. Recently, they found out that there was a theft of a more than two hundred Lebanese diplomatic passports by the Syrian secret service. And one week ago, there was a meeting in Beirut for the Maronite church for all of the bishops, worldwide. The patriarch and the bishops published a communiqué stating that the Syrians were still operating in the country. So I completely believe that they have withdrawn their visible forces, but are still acting in Lebanon.

B&W: There were very large protests last year, both in favor of and against Syria. Who do you think is favored by the Lebanese public?

CK: No, no, no. Listen. The Lebanese people don’t want Syria in Lebanon. Who wants Syria to stay in

Lebanon? Hezbollah, because they are an agent of Syria. When ‘Assad wants to create trouble with Israel, attack Israel, he cannot do this. He asks Hezbollah, so they work as agents to the Syrians and the Iranians. They support Hezbollah because they have a political and military interest in using the group against Israel. The members of Hezbollah engaged in kidnapping; they hijacked a TWA plane and killed a passenger because he was American. When a real government is formed in Lebanon, they must declare [banging on table] Hezbollah a terrorist group.

B&W: How have these tensions played out historically?

CK: Islam began the first war against Lebanon during the Islamic conquest. In the Qur’an, it says that when they have the power, they must push others out if they refuse to convert. Before, Greater Syria was Christian and Jewish. When Islam came, they demanded conversion, and there was a bloodbath. They have a plan to make all people Muslim.

In France, they’re beginning to ask some radical Muslims to leave. There are millions of Muslims there, one million illegally, and they have families of between six and eight members, when the French don’t have many children. This is their plan. The same thing happened in Lebanon, but in Lebanon, we don’t have civil law, only religious law. If you’re Muslim, you can marry multiple wives. If you’re Christian, you can’t divorce. The average size of a Muslim family there is six to nine, but for Christians it is much lower. The risk of Islamic fanaticism is now international.

B&W: We understand that you’re planning to publish a magazine on the subject.

CK: I hope that we can establish a media, my kind of media, to prepare people, both the Lebanese and the other people, for peace. We must live in the area peacefully. Why must we always be scared of Israel? Why does the Arab media have to implant the idea that Israel is taking everything, attacking everything? I want to have a mediator accept the future of peace between Israel and the people of the area. But you have Syria and Lebanon in the way. I hope that very soon I can publish an Arabic- and English-language magazine on the subject.

—Interview by *Brendan Ballou and Zach van Schouwen*