Prologue
The promontory seen from the sea, ca. 1970. Reproduced by permission of the Beirut Ministry of Tourism.
The Eyes of the Mind

Your adolescence was followed
By a long chain of mountains
You love abandoning yourself to the din of sleeping cities
You love exposing yourself to the miracle of the air.
You saw the young girl who comes from the sea
She wears the roses of Alexandria in her hair
The dreams of madness start out through the gardens.

GEORGES SCHÉHADÉ

“Do you know the Lebanon?”
I shook my head.

“In the evenings the sky is like wine and the shadows falling across the terraces have purple edges to them. Overhead, vines—grape and other things with big flowers and a wonderful smell. Everything is very still and warm and soft. It’s the kind of atmosphere in which myths are born and the pictures in your mind’s eye seem more real than the chair you’re sitting on. I wax lyrical, you see.”

ERIC AMBLER, JUDGMENT ON DELTCHEV

There are places that inspire lyricism. Lying in the shadow of a mountain, streaked by riverbeds aligned with one another by some unknown Providence or hand of fate, set alongside coves and shores of rock, pebble, and sand and endowed with natural harbors that for centuries have witnessed the ceaseless labors of mankind, the long and narrow plain that runs along the Mediterranean littoral has captured the imagination of travelers since ancient times, whether they first set eyes upon it from the sea or from the heights of Mount Lebanon. Here, bathed in color night and day, its line broken only by two great cliffs, not quite twenty miles apart, that seem to still the flow of the water, and by a promontory a little further to the south that stands sentinel over the sea, the coast of the Mediterranean has given more than one author the impression of enfolding the heavens in its embrace. “It is indeed
MAP 1. Beirut and Its Physical Site
the happy shore,” the French geographer and anarchist Élisée Reclus wrote about the coast of Byblos, “where voluptuousness was deified.”

Lying a few leagues from that ancient city and, according to a legend cited by Reclus, founded on the same day, Beirut has fewer claims to immemorial glory. But seen from the broad promontory that looks out upon the open sea, practically at the midpoint of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, halfway between Antioch to the north and Gaza to the south, at the center of the western edge of the coastal plain that for some hundred twenty miles constitutes the border of the Lebanese Republic with Syria, Beirut can no more be depicted in neutral terms than Byblos itself. Even if one were to try only to situate it geographically, the alchemy of words could not be avoided. Inevitably one is forced to resort to a formula that was destined to appear in every tourist guide: between sea and mountain. An indispensable phrase—how else can one describe a city built on a cape and dominated over its full extent by a steep and commanding barrier?

From whichever side one considers it, Beirut depends for its effects on the dramatic juncture of the land, at varying elevations, with the Mediterranean. Not only is it overhung to the east by the Mount Lebanon range—even more abruptly today than in ancient times, when it rose to a height of more than fifteen hundred feet some four miles from the city limits and more than three thousand feet scarcely two-and-a-half miles further (today the urban footprint climbs up to the line of the mountain and in some places goes beyond it); the uneven relief of the promontory on which the city is built was to determine its contours and often its toponyms. The old town occupied the gap between the two hills that form this headland. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the metropolitan area expanded with astonishing rapidity, taking possession of the slopes and finally, in the disarray of the war that lasted from 1975 to 1990, spilling over along the northern littoral and, to the south and east, onto the mountainside itself. Nearer to the coast, again to the east, overlooking the modern port and bordered by a river that bears the city’s name, Nahr Beirut (known to the ancient Romans as Magoras), the hill of Ashrafiyyeh rises to a height of more than three hundred feet. To the west, the hill of Musaytbeh—broader though more modest, only some two hundred fifty feet high—plunges vertically almost into the sea, looming over the island-cliffs known to Western visitors as La Grotte aux Pigeons or the Pigeon Rocks, and to natives of Beirut as Rawsheh (or Raouché, from the French word for rock, rocher), and, on its northern face, descending more gently to the fishing port of ‘Ayn al-Mrayseh.

All these things combine to give Beirut a striking and altogether pleasing eminence, readily perceived by the visitor who catches sight of it from a distance, whether arriving by sea or coming overland from Damascus. Even the insistent erosion of the native vegetation, which in the second half of the twentieth century was to impoverish the landscape by eradicating the pine forests on the foothills of Mount Lebanon that succeed the olive and banana trees of the plain, and before
them the cypress and sycamores of the city, has not entirely dispelled the sense of wonder that is summoned up by the sudden appearance of a peninsula that seems to have fallen to earth from the heavens. The arresting natural contrasts of this triangle of land, at once darkened by the shadow of the mountain and bathed in an iridescent light by the shimmering reflections of the sea, are further accentuated by a secondary layer of relief composed of a dense mass of buildings of unequal height, set next to one another like the flowers of a bouquet. No less than the charming small town of the nineteenth century had done, with its reddish orange roofs staggered in tiers against a green background, the modern city captivates and delights.

But does the visitor therefore have to stand back a step or two in order to appreciate the beauties of Beirut? Today there is no choice, because the nearer one comes to the city the more clearly the consequences of uncontrolled growth, and of a corresponding lack of intelligent urban planning, can be seen. One must resign oneself instead to snatching occasional glimpses of Beirut’s architectural heritage and panoramic perspectives—here a triple arcade, there a stained-glass window, elsewhere a fragment of a larger view taking in mountain or sea, sometimes both. One thinks of the surprise that greets travelers on reaching Ras Beirut, at the western end of the corniche, where they see suddenly rise up across the water to the northeast, as though it had been thrust up from the deep, the snow-capped crest of Mount Sannin. Another classic scene, perhaps even more intrinsic to the idea of Beirut since it does not require the intercession of a mountain, is presented by the Pigeon Rocks themselves, anchored in the small bay that lies next to the western flank of the promontory. There they stand, clad in walls of limestone, as though some supernatural power had wrested them out of the bowels of the earth: two almost perfectly vertical monoliths, nearly one hundred fifty feet high, long the reward of

![Banknote showing the Pigeon Rocks across from the cliffs of Rawsheh.](image)

**Figure 2.** A bank note showing the Pigeon Rocks across from the cliffs of Rawsheh.
carefree rock climbers seeking enchantment and the refuge of unhappy souls seeking to take their own lives.

Small consolation, even so, for a city that announces itself from such a distance. The full extent of the architectural wasteland that began to take shape during the 1960s was able to be judged only after the war, with the spectacular renovation of long-neglected masterpieces. It arose from monumental failures of urban planning—failures on such a scale that the attractions of the physical site itself had come to be neutralized. Beginning in the 1950s, and then ever more quickly during the following decade, concrete began to crowd out gardens. Apartment blocks, soon followed by towers devoid of charm, or indeed of any real utility, now dwarfed their neighbors; inexorably they displaced the low houses built out of ramleh, the reddish sandstone that helped to give the traditional domestic architecture of Beirut its distinctive character. The negligence of public administration, reinforced by sharply accelerating rates of demographic growth, erased all memory of the fact that intelligent efforts at managing the expansion of the city had been made during the last years of the Ottoman Empire, and afterward during the French Mandate, often with picturesque results. Still less could the secret rationality of the old suqs inherited from the nineteenth century any longer be suspected.

The very form and shape of the city had been hidden from view by concrete. Albums of postcards and of old photographs of Beirut from the 1930s and 1940s—wildly popular since the war a half-century later—plainly show that during the late Ottoman period and the French Mandate the city outgrew its former boundaries, the original port and the walls of the old town, which occupy the flat land lying between the two hills that form the promontory to the south. Neighborhoods began to spread out on all sides, but private gardens and empty lots still allowed the urban tissue to breathe: the hills themselves preserved an almost cavelike appearance, dotted with two- and three-story buildings whose roofs, covered by Marseille tile, descended gradually from the campus of the American University of Beirut on Musaytbeh and, to the east from the heights of Ashrafiyyeh, down to the modern port. Since then the promontory has been filled up by buildings of miscellaneous design and sometimes disproportionate size, without any effort having been made to integrate them with their natural situation; to the contrary, one detects an ambition—sometimes openly acknowledged—to remodel the headland, if not actually to efface it after the manner of the embankments along the shore, which were replaced by new construction. However this may be, the contempt for common sense and anything approximating a rational street plan has been total. It is a paradox of modernity that as the city grew, the more it came to resemble the labyrinth of the old walled town before the first attempts to untangle the maze of alleys and side streets momentarily gave it an air of harmony. And no matter how much wider the city’s thoroughfares became, the congestion of pedestrian and automobile traffic and the increased stress placed on sidewalks and streets only amplified the sense of dislocation.
and alienation, and deepened the impression of a great many people crammed togeth-er in a small space.

1974: SCENIC ESCAPE FROM THE FAMILIAR

If Beirut in its golden age was no longer a beautiful city, it left no one indifferent—least of all those who did not live there year-round. The perspective that outsiders bring to a place nourishes myths more surely than the routine experience of its native population. Beirut, more than most cities, naturally lent itself to this kind of idealization. Just as one must stand back a ways to appreciate the allure of the city’s setting, so too one needs to keep a certain distance in order to let the eyes of the mind perceive the exhilarating fascination that Beirut once exerted upon occasional or seasonal residents, many of them from the other side of the Mediterranean, or even of the Atlantic. For these distant travelers, as for those visiting from neighboring countries, Beirut’s many masks converged to create the image of an idyllic place—an image now converted by nostalgia into the memory of a lost golden age.

This age reached its apogee on the eve of a chain reaction of violence that between the spring of 1975 and the fall of 1990 came close to sweeping away the city, and along with it the country itself. In 1974, Beirut ranked among the greatest metropolises of the Near East. With a population of only slightly more than a million, its demographic weight was modest by comparison with Cairo, even with Damascus; and as the capital of one of the smallest Arab states, it could scarcely claim to be a major international center of decision making or diplomacy, even if the welcome Beirut granted to the leadership of the Palestinian resistance placed it at the heart of a political dynamic that transcended regional boundaries. No matter. And yet since the early 1960s it had incontestably been one of the premier poles of cultural and economic attraction in the Arab world. Among all the cities of this world, it yielded perhaps only to Cairo—and even then, not in every domain.

As a university seat and medical center, as the capital of Arab publishing and journalism, as a transit port and airline hub, and as a market and clearinghouse for every kind of commercial and banking transaction, from the most ordinary to the most dubious, Beirut fulfilled a great many functions that went beyond the frontiers of the Republic of Lebanon. In exchange for these services it was paid in the form of currency—every currency in the world. Though it was not a wealthy city, it gave every appearance of being one; and because money begets more money, it exhibited the same insouciance one finds in wealthy cities everywhere, serenely confident that its sources of revenue would never dry up.

Extrovert by virtue of the many roles that it played, Beirut was outgoing also by virtue of its very personality. What made its reputation, and in large measure accounted for its charm, was not only the variety of services that it rendered; it was also, and perhaps especially, the fact that it was a bustling metropolis—the like of
which could not be found within a radius of several hundreds of miles. If the range of purposes Beirut served can be described in a sentence or two, a whole kaleidoscope of images must be conjured up to capture the sparkling effervescence of this golden age, which fell between the Palestine war of 1948 and the interminable conflict that began not quite thirty years later. Even conceding that the dizzying pace of life that accompanies every recollection of this period is, yet again, only an effect of nostalgia, it is nonetheless true that Beirut was then a remarkably vibrant city, more vibrant than any other in the entire region, at least to judge from its unrivaled power of attraction.

Lebanon’s Arab neighbors flocked to Beirut in great numbers. Whether they came from the oil states of the Arabian Peninsula, not yet equipped with the amenities of modern cities, or from highly urbanized countries elsewhere, Arab visitors had every reason to be enchanted—in the first place, by the natural environment. With the exception of Syria, which in its exposure to the Mediterranean shares with Lebanon much the same coastal panorama (apart from the Aleppo pines [Pinus halipensis] one finds to the north, more similar to the pines on the upper slopes of Slunfeh and Kassib than to the cedars and parasol pines of Lebanon), and where, on its border with Lebanon, Mount Hermon is crowned by snow year-round, the Near East knows no comparable line of mountainous relief and adjacent sea, and so none of the flora and microclimates found in these two countries. The change of scenery is dramatic: suddenly the monochromatic shades of sand of the Arab steppes give way to a palette of greens and blues, augmented by white during the winter. Even by comparison with the Ghuta, the fertile plain around Damascus that preserves something of the aspect of the Garden of Eden that may once have flowered there, or with the towns of the Orontes Valley, sparkling with water and foliage, Beirut presents a richness of color combined with a softness in the tones of the surrounding landscape that neither of these places can match. Indeed it is this fact, and more precisely the presence of a mountainous terrain, that led the French poet and historian Alphonse de Lamartine to call Beirut the Switzerland of the Levant, long before the law on banking secrecy enacted in 1956 gave another dimension to the analogy.

Already agreeably disoriented by the novelty of its vistas, travelers who arrived in Beirut from the Persian Gulf for the first time in the 1960s and 1970s were all the more disconcerted for having come upon a city built on hills where nothing resembled what they knew—neither the jumble of streets and boulevards nor the lavish window displays in the stores, nor the ample supply of leisure activities nor the orgy of neon signs advertising them, nor the hectic life of the city (both day and night), nor the freedom of appearance enjoyed by the men (and even more so by the women) they passed on the sidewalks. Europe during this period was not yet the familiar destination that it was to become after the oil boom. By default, Beirut was the nearest city of the West. But it was a Western city that spoke the same Arabic
Map 2. The Levant and the Middle East
they did, albeit with a more relaxed accent. Syrians, Iraqis, and even Egyptians, though they were better prepared for such an encounter than visitors from the Gulf states, were no less apt to find themselves caught up in the pulsating life of the city, no less vulnerable to its promptings and solicitations, no less beguiled by its exuberance; and finding themselves reassured at the same time by the many similarities between Beirut and their own capitals, some of which had preceded Beirut on the road to modernity, they were eager to explore a city that they had embraced from the very first moment they set foot in it as their home away from home, neither entirely different from where they came from nor quite the same.

To get to Beirut one had to cross a border, of course, which for everyone but the Syrians meant holding a passport and obtaining a visa. For those who could afford to make the trip, Beirut was the least foreign international destination imaginable, and yet also the most stimulating. There were any number of reasons to go there: to sign a contract, withdraw money from a bank account, meet a business associate, or collect a merchandise sample; to do a bit of shopping, with an obligatory pause to admire the cliffs of Rawsheh before adjourning for lunch in a mountain guinguette or in a seaside café; or else simply to spend a weekend, perhaps only a night—as in those Egyptian films of the period where a map of Cairo suddenly dissolves into a tracking shot of the streets of Beirut. With the decline of Alexandria, Beirut became the favorite set of Egyptian directors filming tales of escape from everyday life. There was nothing very surprising in that, for if life in the Lebanese capital was not always as splendid as the honeymoons in the movies filmed there, it had long served also as the backdrop for the escapes of quite real men and women—as if, when talents were distributed among Arab cities, the fairies decided that Beirut was to be the capital of relaxation and easy living.

This was a rather conventional role, of course, and one in which Beirut could revel without having to pretend. Yet without always knowing it, the city played against type—to the point of making a seaside café called La Dolce Vita a theater of subversion. Named after Federico Fellini’s famous film, it was the toniest café in Beirut in the early 1960s and the meeting place for exiles from every country, from Iraq to Morocco. Not content simply to talk about changing the world or to fill the air with their quarrels, politicians, journalists, and writers gathered there under a cloak of seemingly idle banter to establish contacts, enter into negotiations, and initiate conspiracies—so many plans concocted in the early hours of the morning, whispers of which filled the columns of local papers the next day and gave chiefs of police in more than one Arab country recurrent nightmares.

The appeal of nocturnal plotting, together with the possibility of catching echoes of it through the ears of the only pluralist press then in existence between the Gulf and the Atlantic, constituted a further inducement for the Arab intelligentsia and all those who dreamed of belonging to it—exiles (not all of them involuntary) as well as visitors who came so often that they spent more time in Beirut than in their
own countries. The city’s charms attracted minds no less than money, and from the 1940s onward it was the preferred place of refuge for a number of eminent Syrian scholars and intellectuals, some of them enthralled by the rustic campus of the American University, others hypnotized by the chance of finding a wife or simply by the ease of living in Beirut. The trickle became a flood after the Arab defeat of 1948. In addition to tens of thousands of refugees, the exodus from Palestine brought to Lebanon the spirit of modernity, both in the sphere of banking and in cultural life. Immigration from abroad reached its peak in the 1950s with the advent of authoritarian regimes in the majority of the Arab countries. During this time the Lebanese economy absorbed the traffic that formerly had passed through the port of Haifa, recycled the fortunes fleeing Aleppo, Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus, and captured additional investment in the form of the first petrodollars. The prosperity created in this way was deceptive to the extent that it benefited only a small part of the population; nonetheless it was sufficient to grease the wheels that turned behind the stage on which a vast human comedy was about to turn into tragedy.

Standing at the center of this age of gold and glitter, Beirut was at last in a position to pursue the vocation it had selected for itself during the Awakening (al-Nahda) of the nineteenth century. As a city of culture—one among its many masks—where the inflow of foreign writers and capital caused publishing houses to grow like mushrooms, it became intoxicated with ideas, while yet retaining an ineffably light touch that blunted the edge of the fiercest debates and the most tempestuous controversies: literary quarrels between ancients and moderns; philosophical quarrels between existentialists and Marxists; doctrinal quarrels between Nasserites and Ba’thists (which is to say between Arab nationalists who had converted to socialism and socialists newly alert to the mobilizing virtues of nationalism). These feuds were all the more furiously conducted since for many of the participants, whether they were citizens of Beirut by adoption or by birth, the stakes were really rather small. The level of intellectual pretension, on the other hand, much of it stimulated by the latest fashions from Paris, was quite high.

Although the actors of this theater of shadows and light did not appreciate it at the time, the atmosphere surrounding their performances enriched Arab culture more lastingly than the performances themselves. For the most precious of the many things that Beirut gave artists and writers was a calm and peaceful setting in which an extraordinarily exhilarating range of ideas could be exchanged. For Arab intellectuals, cruelly dispossessed of their freedoms and subject to increasingly repressive prohibitions in their native lands, Beirut was a veritable paradise—so distant and yet so near. Owing in large part to the Westernization of customs and attitudes encouraged by Lebanon’s role as a financial intermediary, the capital offered its exiled guests, as well as its own intellectuals, the most diverting and at the same time the least disorienting stage on which to play: an Arab city that was nonetheless foreign; a foreign city that was nonetheless Arab.
There was no happy medium, at least not yet. The seduction was immediate. Only a few were offended—by the kitsch, by the display (sometimes the indecent display) of wealth, by the absence of seriousness, by an excess of frivolity, ostentation, and affectation. But even if Beirut was capable of arousing hostility, this was only among a minority who mostly refrained from expressing their displeasure. Beirut held out to everyone, even the most hesitant, the prospect of enjoying a comfortable life; but it offered this opportunity more willingly to those who came from far away than to the outcasts camped out on its own outskirts. No failing, no vice was damning enough to ruin the image of Beirut as an oasis of liberty that its Arab consumers—political and economic refugees, persecuted intellectuals, even ordinary tourists—had constructed for themselves; still less did these vices have the power to undermine the legend that the funerary remembrances of a later time were to fix in the popular mind.

Lightness, kitsch, operatic ostentation, easy money—all these things were regarded as virtues by the other image of itself that Beirut was keen to promote during this same period: for Arabs, a playground by the sea; for Westerners, the nearest part of Arabia. All the levantineries that exasperated Colonel Lawrence in his search for “pure” Arabs—the exoticism in miniature, the pleasures of luxury (or its pastiche), the simplification of oriental complexities made possible by the natives’ fluency in Western languages and customs—combined to make Beirut a convenient stopover on the road to the romance of the East, far enough from home that travelers could claim to have penetrated a remote world, but one that at the same time was agreeable enough to dissuade them from pressing on into the interior. Many who imagined that they were only passing through ended up settling in Beirut for good.

Among these newcomers, however, there was no Lawrence Durrell to write about it—still less a Michael Curtiz to set a legendary film there. Elements of the city’s magic are perceptible in the Arabic literature of which Beirut was then the publishing capital, but following the appearance of Pierre Benoît’s La châtelaine du Liban (1924), under the French Mandate, Western appreciations of Beirut were few, apart from a small number of unmemorable action movies—as if the exoticism of the place had become too prosaic, too ordinary to stimulate the imagination. Beirut’s cosmopolitanism, though it was an essential ingredient of its charm, could not by itself inspire literary activity. Indeed, because this cosmopolitanism was taken for granted, it may have had the effect of separating the city from its own skin.

Mass tourism was only in its early stages then, and Lebanon did not yet know the summer invasions of the blond-haired Scandinavians and Germans who had begun to pour money into Spain and Greece, and soon afterward Tunisia. But of all the Arab cities, it was Beirut where Europeans and Americans most often met one another for business and pleasure, not only on the beaches and in the seaside
resorts, in the bars and the grand hotels, but also in the schools and universities, in corporate offices, and in banks and publishing houses, to say nothing of diplomatic chancelleries that were staffed to a much greater extent than the country’s size or its political influence would have seemed to justify.

The functions of all these places, except for the institutions devoted to teaching and research, were conveniently concentrated in a single location: the bar of the Hôtel Saint-Georges. Together with the Normandy, it was the Saint-Georges that gave Beirut its reputation for freewheeling skullduggery and conspiracy. Already in the 1950s it served as the rear base of operations for Kermit Roosevelt Jr. and his fellow apprentice sorcerers, sent out by the CIA to play “the game of nations,” as one of them was later to call the panoply of manipulations that were deployed in the region during the cold war, from Mossadegh’s Teheran to Nasser’s Cairo. Despite Lebanon’s official alignment with the United States, reaffirmed by the landing of the Marines on its shores in 1958 (though later counterbalanced to some degree by close cooperation with Egypt), Beirut was one of the soft underbellies of the cold war, a neutral territory for secret services where every sort of contact could be made, discreetly or with some degree of publicity, according to the client’s wish.

Except in 1958 (and perhaps later on the eve of the war of 1975–1990), military maneuvers and espionage missions were very seldom directed at Lebanon itself. Rather in the fashion of those American and European “B” movies of the period that edited out the surrounding mountain and coastal plain (and sometimes Damascus as well), so that Beirut appeared to be a desert port peopled by Bedouins, a parallel world was created in order to erase the boundaries that separated it not only from Syria but also from Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt, even Iran—all countries very well represented in the Lebanese capital by cohorts of more or less secret agents, in addition to groups of political exiles, whose presence could not help but multiply the number of missions assigned by the spymasters of these nations to their respective stations in Beirut.

Beirut did not limit its hospitality to oriental intrigues, as the history and literature of Western espionage shows. It was there that Kim Philby, a very real British master spy, chose to disappear and then reappear before being spirited out for good by the KGB in January 1963. And although James Bond was never spotted at the bar of the Saint-Georges, where Philby himself was a familiar figure, he did make a brief appearance in a Beirut nightclub in The Man with the Golden Gun (1965), having been sent to avenge the assassination of his colleague 002; and it was in Beirut that he was to find the golden bullet that would take him to the Far East. Philby’s favorite author, the great Eric Ambler, more than once had occasion to resort to the services of Beirut, whether to illuminate the subtleties of a character perplexed by the provinciality of Sofia, as in The Mask of Dimitrios (1939), or to give the order for funds to be transferred to Geneva. In the genre of pulp fiction, less sophisticated but no less revelatory of the city’s talent for extroversion, the first incursion of the
British Special Air Service (SAS) in Beirut, in 1972, was aimed at discovering a dark plot linked once again to the Far East—in the event, to China.

Tintin, the hero of Hergé’s famous comic books, did not seek adventure in Beirut any more than James Bond did. But the boy detective made a stopover there at least once, en route to the imaginary Arab emirate of Khemed in *Coke en stock* (1958). As a good reporter who follows a story wherever it may lead, Tintin prefers the arid expanses of the desert to the city. Beirut appeared to be no more than the antechamber to these expanses, a place where nothing was destined to happen apart from secret machinations and dark plotting; a place where soldiers fighting in nearby theaters of war came for rest and relaxation and where grand dukes stopped to visit on their tours; a place where newspaper correspondents could eavesdrop on the conversations of diplomats and gather information that would help them to understand the societies of the Near East. The first step to understanding, for a correspondent passing through Beirut, was to ignore his immediate environment. Just so, as the American journalist Jonathan Randal was later to note about the reporting of the war in Lebanon, the first reaction to the onset of hostilities was disbelief that such things could happen in Beirut.

But they could. Indeed, more was to take place there than anyone could have imagined.

### 1975–1990: OUTSIDE OF LIFE

An entire city obscured by smoke from explosions and fires, turned red by the flickering of flares, a vast blood stain satisfying the world’s appetite for scenes of violence on a daily basis. Empty streets—empty except for disheveled combatants and unlucky passersby desperately running for safety. Buildings disemboweled by shells, others perforated by their shrapnel. Rockets leveling high-rise apartment buildings, booby-trapped cars cratering intersections. Men and women, old people and children throwing themselves to the ground—none of them trained to endure the violence that surrounded them, but always there to submit to it. Blood running in the streets; blood drying on corpses strewn here and there, in some places piled up on top of one another . . .

Death, and more death—all of it in prime time. No one anywhere in the world who tuned into the evening news during the fifteen-year conflagration that consumed thousands and thousands of lives was able to escape these familiar images of Beirut and Lebanon. No one who wished to produce a documentary based on current events during this time could have failed to sample these images; despite having been reproduced ad nauseam, they had lost none of their power to shock. No one who opened up a newspaper at one moment or another during these fifteen years could avoid being assaulted by the accounts of the violence in which Lebanon seemed to wallow. No one searching for a metaphor for chaos, for the folly of man-
kind, for the incomprehensibility of politics, had any need to rely upon his imagination in the course of these fifteen years: Beirut, now synonymous with war, came to mind at once.

Other conflicts, some of them civil wars as well, were taking place elsewhere during the same period, in Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan, and Sudan. And if one limits oneself to the cold cruelty of statistics, even taking into account the devastating number of fatalities (some 130,000 dead in fifteen years) as a share of the country’s population—roughly the equivalent of two million dead in a country the size of France—the butchery of the Lebanese war was modest by comparison with the genocide in Cambodia. No matter. The Lebanese conflict stands out as one of the most prominent events in the journalistic historiography of the second half of the twentieth century, having taken over from Vietnam as the lead story of the world’s newspapers and broadcasts before being supplanted in its turn by the conflicts that drenched the Yugoslav Federation in blood in the 1990s.

The timing could hardly have been better. When Saigon fell, on 30 April 1975, a few leftist students in the École Supérieure des Lettres in Beirut celebrated by cracking open bottles of champagne; but already for seventeen days the city’s attention had been concentrated on events closer to home. On 13 April, hostilities had erupted on the outskirts of the Lebanese capital—a brief spasm of violence that served as a sort of trial run for the war that was to follow. In early May, a second round of attacks escalated along what was later to be called the “line of demarcation.” Almost four months later, on 17 September, the fighting had taken over the whole of the historic heart of Beirut, which was to remain under siege practically without interruption for the next fifteen years. When at last the guns fell silent for good in Beirut in the autumn of 1990, and the militias were obliged to give up their arms, some of these same weapons quickly found other purposes in Yugoslavia.

Only accidents of history and technology can explain the extraordinary publicity that surrounded the civil war in Lebanon for so many years. If the fall of Saigon had in some perverse sense benefited the Lebanese conflict, by freeing up headlines and war correspondents, another coincidence had helped spread images of the war throughout the world: the transformation of television journalism through the widespread use of videotape in the second half of the 1970s, and thereafter the growing availability of satellite links. Almost at once Beirut became a global theater of death, whose scenes were broadcast, if not live, then with only a slight delay—a form of theater that was all the more riveting when death touched the media itself, as it did during the Israeli bombardment on the eve of the great invasion of 1982, which cut down a French television cameraman as he was filming it.

Neither the international press nor television waited for these advances in communications technology before rushing off to Beirut, however. By late summer of 1975 special correspondents had taken up permanent residence there, and all the more naturally as many of them knew the city well from having made it their usual
stopover on the way to cover the latest convulsion in the Near East. Scarcely had the fighting even begun than several hastily written books appeared. Over time a considerable literature came to be produced—very uneven, to be sure, and in many cases rapidly overtaken by events—in French, English, and Arabic. The country, and still more the city, continued to feed the curiosity of foreign reporters; for them, at least, the golden age would survive even after it had disappeared for everyone else.

The convenience of three commonly spoken languages, until recently the guarantee of a comfortably familiar exoticism, now ensured access to a complicated and perilous world. Just as Beirut’s trilingualism had once served to mitigate the tourist’s sense of disorientation, now it did much of the journalist’s work for him, even when he was new to the city: from warlord to man in the street, interviews could be conducted in either of the two Western tongues; translators could be readily engaged if necessary, and taxi drivers were eager to hire themselves out as advisors, offering to guide their clients, in addition to driving them around, through the maze of local politics and foreign influence. Seldom has cannon fodder been more sought after or more voluble. Someone could always be found to explain, as though it were perfectly obvious, that things were not as complex as they seemed; or, conversely, that they were far more complicated than most people realized. And when all arguments had been exhausted, the conversation could still be prolonged in good conscience: make no mistake, native sources would tell foreign journalists (especially inexperienced ones), it is all a plot—the plot, the Grand Conspiracy. And that worked, at least in the beginning: even though these people may well exaggerate, editors in London and Paris and New York told each other, they are too well informed, too smart for us to deprive our readers (or listeners or television viewers) of their insights. War was more accessible than ever before, only now with the human element as an added bonus to give color and credibility to political analysis of every variety.

Extrovert in its prosperity, the city was still more open in its time of ruin. Its residents, normally so reserved in their dealings with one another, continued to extend a warm welcome to foreigners, as long as they came from far away. But still more than by its way of life, it was through the many meanings the war held for those taking sides in it that Beirut affirmed its continuity. Every day that passed, every new controversy that arose, every fresh hatred that erupted brought undeniable proof of an internal rift having deep roots in scores from the past, some of them more than a century old, none of them ever really settled. The war of Lebanon was unquestionably a war between Lebanese, and in particular, between the residents of Beirut, even if some of them refused—and were always to refuse—to resort to violence. But it was nevertheless a war in which many others came to take part as well, more or less distant strangers who both protracted and aggravated the national
dissensus by arming the protagonists, by manipulating them and being manipulated by them in turn. In war as in peace, the city was regionalized; indeed, it was internationalized. This much is evident. There is no need for analysis to establish the point. The diversity of the human element that had always shaped it was still present.

Nationals of almost three dozen countries participated in the hostilities; many of them were killed there. Apart from a permanent corps of Lebanese belligerents, supplemented by Palestinians, Syrians, and Israelis, Beirut saw a great many others come and go: Iraqis and Libyans sent by their governments in the name of Arab solidarity to support the Palestinian cause (the same governments that a few years later were to provide diplomatic aid, and even arms, to the Palestinians’ former adversaries); Saudis, Emirati, Yemenites, and Sudanese, who for two years served as peacekeepers within a larger Arab Deterrent Force, subsequently manned by Syrians alone; Americans, French, Italians, and British, who composed a short-lived U.S. Multinational Force (USMF); Iranian Revolutionary Guards who trained new Hizbullah recruits in the suburbs. Further emphasizing the cosmopolitan character of the war, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFL), formed in 1978 and still in place more than twenty-five years later (its mandate having been renewed again in 2003), mobilized contingents of French, Italians, Nepalese, Irish, Indians, Norwegians, Swedes, Iranians (among the latter, soldiers who had helped to bring about the Shah’s downfall), and Ghanaians—none of whom were averse to spending a few days in Beirut when a pause in the violence allowed them to leave their bases in the southern part of the country.

And then there were those who came in a private capacity: French fascist mercenaries, lately associated with the Occident group, who fought alongside Christian militias in 1976; Egyptian, Moroccan, and Tunisian fighters supporting the Palestinian resistance as well as representatives of liberation movements allied to it; Eritreans, Sahrawis, and Kurds affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party, not to mention Iraqi Communists; extreme left-wing militants from Europe and South America grouped together within radical Palestinian formations (including Argentinean Montoneros and members of German, Swiss, and Italian offshoots of the clandestine French group Action Direc te); a handful of Japanese Red Army members; and a certain Venezuelan terrorist nicknamed Carlos. In addition to these combatants there were journalists of every nationality, Swiss delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), French and Belgian representatives of Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), and envoys of other international organizations for which Lebanon was, after Biafra, the primary site of humanitarian intervention.

Finally, there were those who had chosen to make Beirut their home and who continued to live there. Among them were rival intellectuals from every Arab country, who, in addition to Lebanese hospitality, often enjoyed the protection of the
Palestinian resistance; with the exception of Syrians who had gone elsewhere in order to avoid being arrested by the regime they had fled, the majority were to remain in Beirut so long as the Palestinians held the upper hand, which is to say until 1982. There were also citizens of French descent. Thanks to the privileged relations that had long united these Christians with their motherland, on the one hand, and to the Arab policy inherited from Charles de Gaulle, on the other, they suffered fewer atrocities, at least at the outset, than other Lebanese; and even after these advantages no longer guaranteed their safety, some chose to stay, while taking care to change neighborhoods. Unskilled foreign immigrant workers hired to do the most menial jobs—Egyptians, Indians, Sri Lankans (especially the women), Filipinos and Filipinas—were sometimes requisitioned by the militias themselves to fill sandbags. Despite the dangers of bombardment, they somehow seemed to find life in Beirut more promising than the poverty of their native villages.

Never more than during these fifteen dark years did Beirut deserve its reputation as a microcosm. Many of the people who were exposed to the dehumanizing effects of the war had come to Beirut only as official observers, of course; but even as spectators they were potential—and all too frequently, alas—victims. Others, as we have just seen, took a more active part in the escalating violence. But it was not only the fact that the fighters came from so many parts of the world that gave the conflict a global dimension. For it was here, in Lebanon, that the ancient hatreds of the East intersected with the most modern forms of armed antagonism; here that all the quarrels of the world became condensed and concentrated.

The first of these quarrels—the one that was obvious to everyone, even if no one was prepared to admit it—might appear to have been peculiar to the country itself. Christians and Muslims, represented by practically all the denominations arising from the genesis of both Christianity and Islam in the Levant and the source, as it used to be said, of contemporary Lebanon’s richness, now and henceforth were the source of its misfortunes and troubles. But perhaps the enmity between Christians and Muslims was not really a distinguishing feature of the Lebanese predicament. No one here was arguing about the superiority of one faith over the other; and the existence of various persuasions on either side amounted to nothing more than a reassertion of mankind’s ancient habits of tribal allegiance, intensified by the failure of the European nation-state to export itself to the East. In recent years much the same thing had been witnessed in Africa, and it was soon to be seen yet more clearly in Yugoslavia, another former Ottoman land. No matter how lethally effective communal division may have been, it can hardly account for the war in Lebanon by itself: at no moment did it appear in its pure form; it was constantly refracted and distorted through the lenses of other, more far-reaching conflicts. It is probably this fact, more than any other, that throws light on the special character of the Lebanese war. Beirut, and the country of which it was the capital, were at one and the same time the site of conflicts between left and right, between Israelis and Arabs,
among Arabs themselves, between the United States and the Soviet Union, and, last but not least, between the “Great Satan” embodied by the United States and its scarcely less demonized counterpart, “Islamic terrorism.”

Indeed, the variety of the conflicts that constituted the war in Lebanon was so rich that it favored the most improbable reversals of alliance. After a while, one-hundred-eighty-degree turns no longer aroused surprise, or even disgust; only indifference. And although reconciliations could occur as suddenly as ruptures, there was seldom much reason for hope: because the worst came to pass so often, it was always expected, and left no one unscathed. Massacres and atrocities were so habitual on all sides that no faction, no protagonist, native or foreign, could escape their fury; no one any longer was able or willing to take off the executioner’s mask. “Even Killers Have a Mother”—thus proclaimed the title of one of these hastily written attempts to capitalize on current headlines by journalists who had no scruples about posing as anthropologists of violence.

But it hardly mattered. Everything could be said and written about this war, because anything could happen in a country that appeared to be at once the victim, the perpetrator, and the incubator of a generalized—and, more disturbingly still, a contagious—madness. By the mid-1980s, possession of a Lebanese passport had become a curse in airports, and the simple mention of travel to or from Beirut on a foreign passport was enough to draw the attention of customs officers and delay the holder’s passage. Pulp novels exported the image of terrorist and spontaneously violent Lebanese to the four corners of the earth. Even in the works of the most serious authors, “Lebanonization” gradually came to supersede “Balkanization”—the very word that so frightened the Lebanese at the beginning of their war—and Beirut found its name converted into a shorthand for the fascination with death. In the major capitals of the world, embassies and government buildings were now equipped on their perimeters with concrete stanchions meant to prevent suicide bombings like the ones that in 1983 destroyed the American embassy in Beirut, the U.S. Marine barracks there, and the Drakkar post of the French Foreign Legion—three land-mark events in the political imagination of the late twentieth century.

The clamor of the world is unkind. For some two centuries the city had assiduously cultivated a claim to universality, and now this ambition had at last been achieved—by means of war; worse still, by the rejection of universality. For the first time in its modern history, Beirut closed itself to outsiders. The attraction of the West led to its opposite: unfortunate foreign nationals were taken hostage, some for many years. In keeping with the cold rationality of state interests, the madness in Beirut caused the geopolitical calculations of the war that at the same moment was being fought by Iraq and Iran to migrate westward, with the result that those who sought to import the Iranian Revolution to Lebanon succeeded in substituting an illiberal and aggressive hatred of difference for the civilized tolerance of otherness that for so long had been the hallmark of the capital. Weary of war, Beirut...
submitted to it, unwillingly. And in doing this it lost its soul: having first witnessed the assassination of Malcolm Kerr—scholar and devoted friend of the Arab world, a native of Lebanon who went on to become president of the American University of Beirut, an institution so closely associated with the city’s reputation and prosperity that its origins are apt to be forgotten—Beirut then, to its shame, allowed Michel Seurat—a French Arabist specializing in the study of Islam who had taken up permanent residence in Beirut, where he passed as a native, a tireless campaigner for the Palestinian cause and brave herald of the rebirth of civil society in Syria, crushed by its own government—to die in a jail in one of its suburbs.

The Western hostages were not the only ones who found themselves outside of life, standing apart from it, as it were—thus the title (Hors-la-vie) of a fine film by Maroun Bagdadi, whose work is perhaps more closely identified with Beirut than that of any Lebanese filmmaker, chronicling the ordeal of a kidnapped French journalist. The whole of Lebanon stood outside of life during this era in its history. To be sure, the war was not continuous, either in time or in space: more or less long periods of calm interposed themselves between the cycles of violence, creating a semblance of normality; a few regions, better protected than others, were spared much of the worst fighting. Nonetheless these fifteen years formed a continuum in which life, though it went on, seemed to be suspended in time—something that was better measured in Beirut than elsewhere.

The war did not take place in Beirut alone, and there were very few places it did not touch at one moment or another, in one way or another. Yet Beirut was incontestably the center of it. Against the backdrop of a modern metropolis, the immemorial atavism of the violence spoke even more forcefully to contemporaries than it might have done elsewhere. A city at war is incomparably telegenic, as viewers were to discover again a few years later in Sarajevo; all the more so when, as in Beirut, the urban landscape presents so many scenes of striking contrast: dozens of acres, deserted, where ghostly buildings overrun by weeds whispered the death of civility; a clear, clean, and precise line of demarcation, barricaded by sandbags, with bunkers haphazardly installed on the ground floor of what remained of buildings, sometimes higher up, manned by fighters exchanging insults and gunfire; on both sides of this line, militarized neighborhoods where the roads had been turned into cul-de-sacs, sealed off by improvised barriers—the bombed-out shells of buses, mountains of red sand, containers stolen from the port—to protect residents who were trying desperately to preserve something of their normal daily routine; neighborhoods that swarmed with activity until a rain of shells or a car bomb emptied it for a few hours or a few days, smashing windows and knocking down walls; and neighborhoods lying further out where cinemas and restaurants sought to maintain the illusion of peace, inevitably undermined by the sight of uniformed militia.
members and military vehicles, and sometimes completely shattered without warning by a long-range artillery barrage, an assassination attempt, or some other form of violent revenge.

There were many ways of waging war in Beirut: indiscriminate heavy artillery bombardment of residential neighborhoods, the most common phenomenon of the conflict; lone gunmen (wrongly called snipers) who were responsible for holding enemy fire from the next street at bay or for blocking intersections; kidnappings carried out on the basis of denominational affiliation, particularly frequent at the beginning of the war, when the city was not yet completely divided up, and culminating in the Black Saturday attack of 6 December 1975 in which hundreds of Muslims were taken hostage (a strategy that was to be revived in the 1980s); small wars-within-a-war between militias nominally fighting on the same side, in which automatic weapons were predominant; nocturnal dynamiting of vehicles and stores; car bombs set off by remote triggering devices, the outstanding technique of political assassination aimed at destabilizing the region; and the commandeering of private apartments, with little or no warning, to house civilians forced out of their own homes.

As if that were not enough, Beirut was destined to absorb the crushing blows of conventional warfare, massively delivered against it by Israel in the summer of 1982. While Israeli armor and ships imposed on the western part of the city—West Beirut, as it was now known—a siege from another age, cutting off the water supply and blocking shipments of food, the Israeli air force, whose pilots had been trained at a cost of millions of dollars and equipped with the latest American technology (and therefore assured of mastery of the skies), calmly set about destroying the Sports City stadium, razing residential buildings, and, by a remarkable and sad irony, bombing the synagogue of the city’s Jewish neighborhood, guarded by Palestinian soldiers. The devastating loss of human life that accompanied this apocalyptic sequence of events was incommensurate with anything that had gone before. Yet it was at this moment that the people of Beirut, at least those who had endured the siege in June and July, were to show the greatest dignity in adversity—until shortly afterward, in September, when other Beirutis, and other Lebanese, inflicted a terrible stain upon the city’s honor: the massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. There, in the space of forty-eight hours, more than a thousand Palestinian and Lebanese civilians perished as the Israeli occupiers turned a blind eye to the slaughter. Beirut tolerated the occupation for not more than two days. Thereafter, from its streets, resistance began to grow. And, as it was to do after each ordeal, Beirut tried to breathe. To breathe life—so near to death.

Twice, in November 1976 and then in October 1982, Beirut believed that reunification was possible. Plans were drawn up for reconstructing the center of the city. But in each case the lull in the fighting turned out to be only an interlude, lasting scarcely more than a year and a half at most; in the meantime the war contin-
ued elsewhere, and the line of demarcation eventually came to be reinstated. The violence ceased on other occasions as well, more briefly but not less hopefully. And then there were periods of neither war nor peace, or, more exactly, of semi-war and semi-peace—periods that, taken together, probably accounted for the better part of the fifteen years of the conflict.

And yet never, not even during the most promising intermissions, did the city live in any normal way. Despite the attempts at reunification, it was no longer capable of seeing itself whole. In the place of Beirut there were now West Beirut and East Beirut, two hemispheres, two separate worlds that turned their backs on each other. If it was still sometimes possible to go back and forth between them, albeit rarely without risk, the everyday workings of the city were split in two; with the forced relocation of businesses and government offices, vehicular traffic in one part of the city was now sealed off from traffic in the other. Even during lulls in the fighting, the cityscape bore the marks of war: one-way streets, redirected to accommodate the new geography of violence; metal stakes driven into the pavement to prevent unknown drivers from stopping and planting bombs in parked cars; streets closed off to shield party offices and the residences of their leaders from attack.

More striking still, in the face of so much abnormality, was the stubborn determination of the inhabitants to go on living as normally as possible. Year in and year out, children went to school, even though they were never sure of being able to finish an entire year of classes. Marriages were celebrated, sometimes with great pomp. Plays were put on in the theaters. Shows were mounted in the galleries. Other forms of leisure and entertainment were adapted to changed conditions: new cinemas and restaurants opened, and all the more readily as East Beirut expanded toward the suburbs of the north shore and the old summer encampments on the mountainside. With the arrival of spring, the familiar rituals of sunbathing and swimming filled the beaches and seaside resorts, or at least as far as security permitted.

Was the war therefore forgotten? It was forgotten every day, without for a moment ever being absent from anyone’s mind. There was always the chance of being shot at by a lone gunman while taking a detour along an unsafe street in order to get to a concert on time; of seeing a boobytrapped car explode on the way to the supermarket; of being shelled coming back from the beach. Even knowing that one might never come back from this or that place, one went just the same. And even for those who did not want to fight, there was no choice but to approach daily life as though it were an assault course—knowing when to take cover, constantly listening, straining to separate the background noise of random gunfire from the sound of shots that were meant to kill. Many innocent bystanders lost their lives; others sustained permanent injuries. It is perhaps for this very reason that Beirut was so gruesomely fascinating—because life went on despite the onslaught, and because the city, in its decline and decay, nevertheless remained a city.

And yet the moment finally came when the city no longer resembled itself. West
Beirut, where most of the shrines of the golden age were concentrated, somehow or other managed to keep up appearances until 1982. But all attempts at pretense suddenly evaporated after the tranquil hiatus of the first months of 1983. The Palestinians having been forced to withdraw, purely Lebanese animosities once more reasserted themselves as the focus of American attention began to shift to other theaters of the cold war. The militias no longer even bothered to try to conceal their motives. It was now war for the sake of war—for the sake of adding this or that side street to one's territory, of lining one's pockets with profits from rackets and trafficking of all kinds. Sectarian fighters who had been forced to leave their homes in the countryside looked to settle accounts with a city that had long relegated them to its margins. The newcomers had come to rule, not to create a place for themselves in the life of the city; and having failed to tame Beirut, they sought to make a martyr of it. Outsiders hoping to mediate between the contending factions were now denied access to it. The few foreigners who still dared to enter the city found that they were welcome only as hostages.

Though it still appeared as a headline of the international news, Beirut had now been forgotten by the world. Many of its own inhabitants no longer thought of anything but getting out. By the tens of thousands they began to leave—for Paris and London in the case of the social elites and the most Westernized segments of the middle class, followed by many less affluent residents who met up again in Germany, Sweden, Australia, and Canada. East Beirut, which seemed to expand to the extent that West Beirut contracted, proved incapable of preserving the city in its old image. The war left its scars there as well: no matter that the leisure and entertainment industry found some measure of compensation in the extramural outgrowth to the east, the inhabitants of this sector had likewise begun to leave en masse; those who remained had to make their way through a wasteland. But the real problem lay deeper. The ideology of occupation and urban warfare scarcely lent itself to the mixing of peoples and the exchange of ideas that used to be Beirut's hallmark. Westerners, who once had been warmly welcomed, were now shunned. The same was true of wealthy visitors from the Persian Gulf. As for the Arab intellectuals who had so proudly boasted of the city during its three glorious decades, and who for the most part held on in West Beirut until 1982, there was nothing in East Beirut to tempt them.

Beirut had lost its old spirit, which now had to be sought much further afield. Paris and London welcomed journalists and writers from the Gulf to the Atlantic, and gave a home to pan-Arab magazines and advertising agencies; but together even these two cities could not quite replace Beirut as the intellectual capital of the Arab world. The old spirit of the city survived above all in the legend composed by its elegists. If Western authors, with one or two exceptions, did not notice the death of Beirut, Arab writers well recognized its grief and suffering. "We have been unjust to you, O Beirut, this we confess," proclaimed the Damascene poet Nizar Qab
bani, bard of women and romance and long a resident of the city, where his collections had been published in print runs of millions of copies. “Beirut, our tent,” sighed the Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish on leaving his home of ten years, “Andalusian and Syrian Beirut.” And while the city became congealed in myth, it found consolation in the confidence that one day it would exist again: in the words of the Lebanese poet Nadia Tuwayni, “a thousand times died, a thousand times reborn.”

WHICH CITY? WHICH HISTORY?

Poetic license cannot by itself account for the idea of a city that is always reborn. In the event, Tuwayni’s hyperbole only repeated the widespread popular belief that Beirut had survived destruction seven times over the course of its long history, while at the same time amplifying this belief. Well before the most recent of these ruinations, Élisée Reclus, the father of modern geography, had handed down the legend to succeeding generations: “This city is one of those that must live and relive, come what may: the conquerors pass on and the city is reborn behind them.”

Can we be so sure? If it is reborn, is it then the same city? Is its history the same history? The historian of Beirut cannot evade these questions. At the very outset he finds himself confronted with the problem of choosing a starting point for his inquiry and, by virtue of that, a point of view. Are Beirut’s many lives and deaths in need of rediscovery? If so, how far back must the historian go? All the way to remotest antiquity, on the ground that continuous human settlement at this site is attested long before the Neolithic revolution, perhaps as early as 5000 B.C.E.? Is he obliged to search for evidence of a linear progression linking the ages of the ancient city and the metropolis of the twentieth century, by turns proud, battered and bruised, convalescent? Should he conflate Berytus, the mother of Roman law, and Bayrūt, the capital of Arab letters, in a single unbroken span of time? Or, admitting the existence of distinct stages, should he lay emphasis instead on more recent ones, because they alone have built the city as it now stands before our eyes and resides in our imagination?

These difficulties arise in part from the fact that Beirut’s past was long the poor relation of both Lebanese national history and the ancient and medieval history of the Levant. But they occur also because in Lebanon, more than elsewhere, whatever choice the historian makes amounts to an assertion of identity, and because within Lebanon this is nowhere more true than in Beirut itself. For in trying to reconstruct the urban history of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, from the earliest times to the present, scholars have traditionally distinguished places such as Byblos and Tyre, modest today, whose historiography is almost exclusively centered on an unfading ancient glory, from places such as Damascus and Aleppo, which, though each claims to be the oldest inhabited city on earth, are of interest to historians mainly in their relation to the Arab and Ottoman past. Beirut belongs to
both of these classes, however. It is therefore an object of inquiry for two groups of specialists who have nothing to say to each other, on the one hand Phoenicianists, Latinists, and Hellenists, and on the other Ottomanists and students of twentieth-century history. In this regard Beirut can be compared only to Alexandria, where an interval of fifteen centuries separates the Ptolemaic golden age from the time of Durrell. Even so, Alexandrian studies do not encounter the difficulty posed by Beirut—as the capital of a state that is itself recent and, for much of its history, problematic—of giving a coherent historical account of a national community.

What is more, since the prospect of yet another rebirth of Beirut, after fifteen years of war, at once calls to mind all the other, more ancient rebirths, there is a risk that the continuity, if not of the city’s buildings and streets, then in any case of the myth that has grown up around the city will harden into dogma. On this view Beirut is like the phoenix, forever reborn from its ashes, and therefore eternally one, if only by virtue of the ceaseless combat of life against death that has taken place there through the ages. “An ancient city for the future”—as the slogan of the corporation responsible for rebuilding and developing the center of the city after the civil war was to put it.

Legend and advertising apart, the notion of an abrupt break with the past became more difficult to defend once the first tangible signs of reconstruction strengthened a growing concern for conservation, based on both archeological research into the vestiges of antiquity and restoration of the architectural monuments of two more recent eras, the later Ottoman Empire and the French Mandate. Such evidence of the unity of the physical site is all the more compelling since no straightforward linearity links the old and the new in Beirut. But even if the city exerted comparatively little influence on the course of history until the modern period, one cannot ignore the fact that it has been honored by the presence of heroic figures since ancient times: Pompey, Saladin, and Jazzār, who defeated Napoleon Bonaparte at Acre; probably also Muʿāwiya, the brilliant founder of the Umayyad Dynasty; perhaps even Rameses II and Jesus of Nazareth.

The obligation to choose does not vanish for all of that. Neither the unity of the site, nor the stability of its names from Phoenician to Arabic via Greek and Latin (Birūta, Berytus, Bāyrūt), nor the frequency of the visits paid to the city over the centuries by illustrious conquerors disposes of the need to attach relative priority to the various stages that jointly constitute the city’s history. If the historian cannot wholly escape taking a slightly romanticized view of Beirut, owing to its several rebirths, neither can he avoid what today constitutes the memory of the city in its two most familiar images, as contradictory as they are complementary: crucible of Arab modernity and scene of self-destruction. These twin images, each of which resides in the imagination rather than in relics, cannot help but form the starting point for subsequent research. Unlike Byblos, Tyre, and Sidon, Beirut emerged as a great metropolis only toward the middle of the nineteenth century. From then on, however,
it was to occupy a place in the Arab and the Mediterranean world that transcended its physical boundaries no less than the size of its population.

I therefore propose to consider the history of Beirut from the moment when its rise as a major city calls for an explanation. If I have chosen also to give an account, in the long first chapter that follows, of the different periods that its site has known from ancient times until the moment when the East once again assumed prominence in Western thinking, at the end of the eighteenth century, this is not out of any desire to demonstrate my command of the relevant scholarly literature nor to disarm my critics in advance, but rather because modern ideas of Beirut, as of Lebanon in general, are so often apt to suffer from misconceptions about this past or from doubtful conclusions drawn from it, such as the belief in a permanent renaissance. At the same time, I am mindful that the city’s claim to historical continuity must be balanced by a recognition of the discontinuity of its settlement over the centuries. Having died and then been reborn, the city inevitably had to replace the people it had lost. The extraordinary demographic growth recorded from the beginning of the nineteenth century, on the eve of Beirut’s boom, until the beginning of the twentieth suffices by itself to establish the reality of the break from the past. This has the consequence, among others, of diminishing the need to rely on genealogical history, except in connection with certain developments that accompanied Beirut’s rapid expansion.

The demographic growth of the nineteenth century cannot be judged in quantitative terms alone. If the population was renewed, the same is true of the hearts and minds of the people who composed it. Surely all of them, newcomers no less than the increasingly small minority of old families, remained attached to at least some of the particular customs and beliefs with which they had been brought up; nonetheless each of them was changed by the experience of living in a city that itself had been transformed. This observation, the truth of which will become evident in the pages that follow, led me in turn to reject a microsociological approach—in part, too, because excellent work of this type has already been done. While not neglecting the narcissism of small differences, I have chosen to examine subcultures only to the extent that they contributed to the formation of the city’s modern identity.

Just as Beirut is obviously plural by nature, so too any satisfactory history must take into account the various political, economic, and above all cultural dimensions of the city’s life during the past two centuries. It should not be supposed that plurality resists definition. The character of Beirut during this period can indeed be defined, which is to say that it can be given a context and framework in which its history can be written. In seeking to formulate the most expansive definition possible, and one that will also be of greatest interest to the historian, it will be useful
to think of Beirut as a *Westernized Mediterranean Arab metropolis*. Let us take these terms in reverse order. Beirut was indisputably a metropolis from an early date, no matter that simple numbers might seem to suggest otherwise. Even when its demographic profile was unimposing by comparison with the other major cities of the Middle East, it belonged among them by virtue of the various functions it fulfilled in the regional economy. That the city is also Arab goes without saying. Nevertheless it should be kept in mind that, above and beyond the economic and cultural place that Beirut occupies in the modern Arab world, this aspect of its character has also made itself felt in the domain of religion; and that, despite the city’s minor importance until the Tanzimat of the mid-nineteenth century, its development cannot be understood in isolation from the social and urban history of Ottoman Syria and, more generally, of Arab Islam.

Beirut is Mediterranean in a dual sense. First, before becoming a great city it was for a long time one of the chief commercial ports of the Levant, and therefore intimately associated with the development of trade along the rim of the inland sea. Other cities of the eastern littoral had welcomed European merchants (notably Genoans and Venetians) over the centuries, but few contested Beirut’s primacy as a point of entry into the Islamic world for not only the manufactures, but also the ideas, of Christian nations. With the growth of the city’s port in the late nineteenth century this role was reaffirmed and at the same time modernized, so that Beirut became a vital transit hub for the outflow of goods and materials produced in response to rising demand from Europe after the Industrial Revolution. But the city was Mediterranean for another reason as well. In orienting its development toward commercial expansion, it came to participate in an international style of urbanism, itself in the process of formation, that was shaping the growth of cities on both sides of the sea, from Marseille to Alexandria and from Algiers to Smyrna. While conserving elements of a Levantine architectural syntax, the majority of the buildings recently completed or under construction in Beirut at the turn of the twentieth century displayed European influences, for the most part French and Italian. Some of these influences were transformed directly, others were taken over from Ottoman models or annexed from contemporary Egyptian sources.

Finally, and most plainly of all, Beirut is Westernized; indeed, this is perhaps the most striking element of the standard image that has grown up around the city. Among both Arabs and Westerners themselves, Beirut’s reputation derives chiefly from its cosmopolitanism and its talent for acculturation. For at least a century its prosperity depended on the ease with which Western consumer goods could be acquired there and with which European (and, later, American) leisure activities could be enjoyed, as well as on the relaxed style of life that Arab visitors, in particular, found so seductive. To reduce Westernization to these things alone would surely be a mistake; but to overlook them would be still more misleading, not only with regard to the history of Beirut and of Lebanon, but also for the history of Arab
modernity as a whole. The tendency to ignore Western influence—perhaps the greatest weakness of contemporary Arab historiography—is the result of an absence of critical analysis that, paradoxically, varies in proportion to the strength of the spell that so many intellectuals, now scattered over the face of the earth, nostalgically ascribe to the lost *dolce vita* of Beirut, the memory of which unites them despite their mutual antagonisms. In much the same way, Egyptian cinema—so highly regarded by the most serious-minded critics—has so far escaped examination by historians of *mentalités* in the Arab world.

In acknowledging this dimension of the city’s experience, of course, one runs the risk of seeming to credit the disparaging image summed up by the catchphrase “Beirut-Banks-Brothels.” Not that this image is totally false; to the contrary, it has long been an essential part of the city’s identity. But reductionism of this sort pre-
vents us from fully understanding its past. The history of Beirut has four main branches: social history, something infinitely more subtle than a simple catalogue of the services Beirut rendered to its visitors would suggest; urban history, which in a thousand and one baroque ways reflects the city’s constant determination, not always well appreciated, to embrace a hybrid cosmopolitanism; the history of mentalities, which cannot be abridged so that it reads as a mere chronicle of the city’s wealthiest inhabitants; and, finally, the history of ideas, eclipsed until now by the obsession with profit and pleasure. Beirut in its golden age cannot be likened either to a sort of floating casino moored off the coast of the Near East or to a free city, of which there were many in the colonial world. Distant though its horizons may have seemed to visitors from lands of sand and oil, life in Beirut was not an off-shore operation.

Beirut was, and is, a very real place, whose playfulness and love of show and spectacle fail to conceal its inner seriousness. It is perhaps in just this that the true modernity of Beirut resides, that its value must ultimately be weighed in relation to its place in the history of mentalities and in the history of ideas. For Beirut stands out among the cities of its age not only for having helped to formulate the concept of Arab modernity, but also, and still more importantly, for having helped to make it a living thing—even if, in doing so, Beirut lured itself into a dead end.

In proposing a history along these lines, I have no intention of idealizing my subject; nor do I forget that the city exhausted itself as a consequence of its own violence. No inquiry into the fate of Beirut can avoid asking why it failed. Nonetheless I have not wished to consider the history of Beirut solely in the light of its most recent and most tragic episode. The reader will see that nothing, or very little, of what led to the war has been ignored; but the war itself is treated only as the culmination of the events that went before, no matter that this outcome was not inevitable. The temptation was great to speak of the city under siege, and of the ways in which it adapted to catastrophe. But to have given in to that temptation would have distorted my fundamental purpose in writing this book, which as the history of a city must be a tale of civility—even if this remains to be reinvented—and not a tale of its death.

Beirut
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