

Missed call

Pondering inter-Arab bloodshed, [Youssef Rakha](#) scratches his nose

Something wakes me at midnight on Saturday. Another sleepless night of Al-Jazeera, and I've been unconscious since my return from the office. With an empty stomach and a groggy head, I reach instinctively for my mobile phone. Among the three missed calls listed on the screen, I catch the name of Michel Elefteriades.

It's been a while since I heard from this most famous of all my friends, the many-faceted Lebanese Civil War veteran-turned-music producer, otherwise known as Emperor Michel I of Nowherestan, and I'm wondering whether or not he might be following up his invitation for me to visit him in Beirut (in recent weeks I've had a strong reason to go, so the thought is exciting even despite last night's overdose of adversity). But since getting this month's bill, I've cancelled the roaming facility on my phone, my only way to call back Michel's Lebanon number. So I text a brief apology instead, reviewing the next day's tasks while I stretch, yawn and head for the kitchen. I don't think he will call back.

Nor does it occur to me that talking to the Emperor might help with the most pressing of said tasks: the writing of a "culturally aware response" to ongoing violence in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories -- something I'm sure readers of these pages will appreciate, though I have no idea what, when click comes to save, it might actually entail. Once again I wonder whether to make a bulk e-mail request for reactions, seek out a locally available "source", or simply scour online news sites afresh.

Bread, cheese and, more essentially, Turkish coffee to the rescue -- and I'm sifting through the notes I made in the morning. Before the hour is up, hallelujah, I have a general outline for what I want to say. Ditto: That the Fateh-Hamas conflict need not have devolved into inter-Palestinian war; That armed Palestinian presence in the northern refugee camp of Nahr Al-Bared need not be casting the shadow of 1975 on Lebanon all over again; That both conflicts raise the old niggling suspicion of some more benevolently inspired interventions on the part of the global powers that be; And that, at their allegedly secular-Islamist root, there lies, still, that suffocating sense of America versus the Arab-Muslim world.

Suffocating being the operative word, largely because absurd: Neither the Arab genetic constitution nor Islam is inherently at variance with what President Bush has called "the way of life enjoyed by free nations" (Saudi Arabia presumably being one such?) Which is how America is defined, in opposition to the "terrorists" to whose line of thinking -- boasting nothing greater than Mohammad Abdel-Wahhab or Sayed Qutb -- the entire history of Arab-Muslim civilisation has been reduced.

Up to and including, that is, at least six whole centuries in which, while it occupied a position very like that of the West's in our times, said civilisation drew in not only Christians, Jews and "Franks" but every facet of its geographic and human extent. For as long as anyone remembers, in fact, among Arab governments, (relative) alliance with Washington has resulted in political oppression, sectarian strife and -- indeed I'm very sorry, yes -- militant Islam far more than it has reforms.

Finally I read through what I've scribbled. Phew! A small triumph. And my tiny new computer on my lap, fingers hovering above the keyboard, a blank document beckoning, I'm poised for ingenuity when the phone



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rings...It has taken another three days for the present piece to materialise.

Not much has changed in either Gaza or le Liban -- except that by now Michel, if all has gone to plan, will have safely left Beirut. I have done much copy editing in the interim, continued reading Orhan Pamuk's latest novel, used Microsoft MSN to chat with Lebanese friends at unworldly hours and thought a lot more about those masked figures bearing big guns in the office of Mahmoud Abbas. I have thankfully avoided Al-Jazeera.

Now, his (proletariat) Highness Emperor Michel I being the exemplar of "a way of life" I am eager to promote in these unfree nations of ours, I've decided to take stock of the effect of the violence on his person, rather than develop the argument outlined above -- an exercise which, while readily drawing accusations of the conspiracy mentality and generating no end of futile factual arguments, would not come to anything very culturally aware, I decided.

His Highness, by contrast, is all culture: He is the founder of the Music Hall, owner of, among much else, Elefteriades Productions-Elefrerecords, holder of the Warner Bros label, and author of some of fusion's most exciting pairings (Hanin and the Cubans, Wadie El-Safie and Jose Fernandez, Tony Hanna and the Balkan Gypsies, Demis Roussos and the Oriental Takht); He has opened restaurants, designed lines of clothing, produced art, and appeared on satellite television; More recently, with Nowherestan, he drew up an alternative (new) world order that abolishes both national frontiers and democracy, divides the world into two hemispheres and employs scholar-senators in place of politicians; A Greek by blood, Frenchman by education, quasi-Muslim by sociopolitical sympathy, Lebanese nationalist by affiliation with Michel Aoun, Roma Gypsy by musical association, he embodies the possibility of a pluralistic Arabness -- one that speaks not of minorities and their rights but of whole, integrated societies that share a language, a sense of the world in its entirety and a productive energy. It is he, of all people, who has had to leave Beirut...

I didn't get a chance to say much during the 15 minutes I spent on the phone with Michel, a little before two in the morning on Saturday night. I didn't have much to say on the topic, but I wouldn't have minded if I had: His Highness is the kind of interlocutor I prefer to listen to. Sounding a little rattled if no less articulate than usual, he started with the declaration that he had was leaving Lebanon -- for Belgrade where, as he explained with subdued pride, music has provided him with good friends. He was leaving in much the same way as he had done long ago, towards the end of the war -- not to settle down in Beirut again until 2005, when a general amnesty was granted -- and he sounded frustrated even as he expressed resignation.

It was pointless, he kept saying, pointless and potentially fatal to stay. When last I saw him, the Emperor had complained of an atmosphere in which, as a businessman, he did not feel secure enough to make a sustained effort. He had spoken of the authorities unaccountably making life difficult, saying it was because of his Aounist sympathies. He had looked thinner and more preoccupied than I remembered him. Now it is easy not to take Elefteriades seriously, given the things he tends to talk about: multinational secret-intelligence schemes; billion-dollar budgets; how PhD holders who arrive in Hummer vehicles can change your life forever by murmuring a few words into a satellite phone.

But the more you find out about him, the more convincing it all becomes -- and you have to stop thinking about it before it drives you insane. Whatever the general case, this was clearly no joke. Michel didn't make it clear until the end of the conversation, but he had received death threats from people who have made attempts on his life in the past. They had called him and promised to kill his children, rape his wife, draw blood from his eyes. And though he knows they were Aoun's traditional war rivals, the ruthless Lebanese Forces -- perpetrators of the Sabra and Chatila massacre, among other, often inter-Christian atrocities -- as he also explained, with more exasperation than fear, it is not the Forces that matter. It had been decided that there should be war in Lebanon; within months, he said, there would be war in Lebanon. None of the little players have much to do with it; they are pawns, not chess masters; and, well, it is too late to be optimistic now.

But who on earth decided it?

The Emperor just ranted on about Neocons: how their principal ideologue had been a Jew who contributed to the theory of Nazism; how the Neocon attitude is now openly adopted in France -- an unprecedented development; how American gurus were explaining to the public that to be a good Muslim is to be a terrorist, and that believers are therefore faced with a dilemma for as long as they live.

It was clear to him, he said, that even as a Christian in this part of the world, you were bundled together with Muslims. You were more like a Muslim than Westerner, after all. Getting rid of the one, they might as well get rid of the other. A war of civilisations indeed. At this point I remembered something Michel had told me about the divide-and-conquer strategy deployed in the postcolonial world: "Had Americans existed in the time of Saladin, they would have told him, 'You are a Kurd, those Arabs are out to get you!' And he wouldn't have managed to liberate Jerusalem from the Crusaders." Better let those people kill each other off -- he was saying now -- so they won't stand in the way of Empire.

And calming down again, gradually, the Emperor told me he would eventually move to Egypt, where he already has had business deals in the making. "But you understand this is about the entire region," he added. "In Lebanon it's going to happen in a couple of months. In Egypt, give it five, six years. Till Mubarak dies. It is still happening..."

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