

# perspectives

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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

## Middle East & North Africa

### Unboxing the Game: the Obvious & the Obscure



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# Editorial

Politics are brimming with metaphoric references to games – be it the famous “Great Game” as the diplomatic confrontation of great powers in Asia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was referred to, the understanding of strategic moves in a region as a “chess board,” war “theatres” or references to the “players,” the strong of them framed as “actors,” the weak as “pawns”, or the crazy ones behaving like “wild cards.”

In fact, governments like to boast about their political games but get uncomfortable when citizens don’t accept the passive role they have been assigned, and start speaking truth to power by telling jokes in the face of power. Oppressors get particularly dead serious as soon as they are challenged by citizens’ creative resistance and artistic play, well aware of how powerful these tools are for activists in garnering support by exposing their tricks.

This is why we decided to look at where the playful and the serious overlap, where politics seem like games, serving as a show off and at the same time a distraction to keep citizens from engaging in them.

Jorn De Cock details how the Beirut Hippodrome’s horse races are far from an elitist “Ascot of the Middle East,” and after the civil war emerged as a rare common ground for people of the most different confessional and social backgrounds to meet. Mahdi Abdel Jawad from Tunisia delves into childhood memories and games

overcoming societal borders.

Dr Danyel Reiche looks into Lebanese politics and major sport events, matched by Salma Belkebir’s take on the public event culture in Morocco and the state policies regarding culture and state decisions on strategically funding it. Lea Baroudi, director of Lebanon’s MARCH organisation illustrates how theatre is a way of overcoming social and political divisions. Similarly, at the Circus School of Bir Zeit, performance provides a social benefit, as detailed by Hazar Azzeh. Inga Hofmann shows the rise of the queer and drag scene in Lebanon as a deeply political act, claiming the rights of the communities to be recognized.

Coming to the virtual world, Tanite Chahwan takes us into the gaming scene in Lebanon. Ana Maria Luca analyses the use of computer games as a tool for recruitment for the Lebanese Hezbollah as well as for the so called Islamic State. Finally, Professor Rami el Ali looks into the future, where reality blends with virtual reality; and into the evolving debate in the Arab world on the opportunities, risks and ethical questions this blend will present.

In this sense: ready – steady – go!

Dr Bente Scheller, Bauke Baumann, Dr Bettina Marx,  
Dr Heike Löschmann

# A Day at the Beirut Races

Jorn De Cock

Horse racing is often associated with glamour, billionaires and fancy hats. Not so in Beirut. Imagine cans of beer, water pipes, and an eagerly betting lower middle class audience of taxi drivers and hairdressers. Beirut's Hippodrome epitomises both the city's turbulent history, and its opportunities.

Horse racing in the Middle East is usually associated with the bling of Dubai's Meydan Racecourse, which opened in 2010. Dubai's emir Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, 69, owns the Godolphin stables, one of the richest and most successful in horseracing history. The Meydan hippodrome features a golf course and five star hotel, and hosts the annual US\$10m Dubai World Cup race, a highlight of the season that is broadcast live in the United States.

It's not exactly the world into which we are venturing when trying to find the gate to the Beirut Hippodrome. The guards there are alert but friendly and, for reasons nobody seems to remember, foreigners and women enter for free. Male Beirutis pay between 5,000 and 15,000 Lebanese liras (three to ten US dollars), depending on the section of the grandstand to which they want access. On this Thursday night, the atmosphere among the hundreds of spectators is lively and focused: the audience takes its races seriously, men of middle age are studying race programs printed on A4 sheets of paper, hoping to pick a winner.

That's another marked difference to Dubai, where betting at the race course is not possible (though online betting can hardly be avoided, of course). Islam regards betting as a form of gambling, and so it is technically forbidden. In Beirut, with its ethnically and religiously diverse population, betting at one of the many booths beneath the grandstand seems almost a must.

"I bet 200 dollars on Dalida," says Ahmed. He comes to the races every week and seems to

know all the horses and jockeys. "Some of them can be bought for a can of Almaza" (Lebanon's most popular beer), he jokes. Unfortunately, Dalida doesn't seem to agree with Ahmed's intricate knowledge of the races: the horse finishes in second place.

Losing two hundred dollars is quite unfortunate for Ahmad, who works as a company driver. But it doesn't stop him from betting on the next race, albeit a little more carefully. Together with his friends, one of them a hairdresser, he smokes a sheesha water pipe while seated on a plastic chair. Dubai and Royal Ascot are miles away from this Hippodrome in the Levant.

His friends hail from Dahieh, the Arabic word for 'suburb', which has become synonymous with a collection of small neighborhoods and former villages south of Beirut with a mostly Shiite population. A few meters down the stand we meet Michel, a Christian who's a pensioned school teacher.

In a city with a history of sectarian division, the audience reflects all its ethnic and religious backgrounds. Interesting detail: most of the jockeys riding the horses are from the little known Dom minority, sometimes called "Lebanon's Roma." Dom men are often smaller than other Lebanese, and they certainly seem to know how to handle horses.

## Green Lung

Despite a substantial presence of armed policemen and soldiers – "in Lebanon you never know when a fight will start," explains one of them – the atmosphere at the Hippodrome is one of camaraderie and excitement about the races. Whereas modern Beirut is mainly known for its upper class VIP events, the only models here are the horses: gorgeous, elegant Arab

pure breds, the only type allowed to race in Beirut. They're smaller than the Thoroughbred horses that run in Dubai and Europe, but beautiful they are.

"Preserving the Lebanese Arab pure bred is only one way in which the Beirut Hippodrome is playing a vital role in preserving Lebanon's heritage," says Joe el Khoury, a medical doctor and activist with the Association for the Protection of the Lebanese Heritage (APLH). El Khoury is also the main author of APLH's book about the one hundred year history of the Hippodrome, published this year: *"L'hippodrome du Parc. Un Siècle dans l'Histoire du Liban"* ("The Hippodrome of the Park. A century in Lebanese History").

Perched between the Mediterranean Sea and the surrounding mountains, Beirut is home to almost half the country's population – an estimated 2 million people – and its capacity to grow further is limited. There are very few parks or healthy public spaces left in the city, making the race track an ecological asset as well.

The Hippodrome serves as the city's green lung. It used to be part of Beirut's "Horsh el Snoubar," or pine forest, a lusciously green oasis in a city where every other square metre seems to be supporting a high rise building. "The Hippodrome is technically separated from the Pine Forest by a street, but together they remain one vast green historical space in the middle of Beirut," El Khoury explains. "No urban development project or war has ever managed to destroy all the ancient trees. But every war and every new development project ate away more of the trees, and the site as a whole keeps being in constant danger."

The Hippodrome plays a unique social role as well, one of the few places in Beirut where people of all backgrounds and creeds enjoy a great time without the political tensions that foreigners associate with Lebanon and the wider Middle East. A place where all Beirutis can come together, where sectarianism doesn't play a role.

## The Ottoman Hippodrome

The Hippodrome's 100 year history epitomises the many stages of Lebanon's complicated history. Its plans were conceived during the First World War by Alfred Sursock (1870 1924), a Greek orthodox businessman from a well known Beirut family. He received the blessing and cooperation of the Ottoman governor of the city, which is all the more remarkable because the governor represented the Ottoman caliphate. Moreover, a new villa that was to be built as part of the Hippodrome complex

– known as the *"Résidence des Pins"* – was meant to become Beirut's first official casino.

Lebanon went through rough times in the First World War. Although it didn't suffer much from direct fighting during the Great War, hundreds of thousands of locals disappeared as the battles raged. The impact of a naval blockade by the British and French fleets devastated Beirut, as did the food shortage that resulted from locust swarms destroying crops and the Ottoman army sequestering what was left to feed its soldiers. Additionally, Lebanon's Ottoman rulers responded to local Arab nationalists clamouring for independence with hangings and repression.

And yet construction of the Hippodrome began, according to some as a grand job creating scheme in harsh times. The Hippodrome witnessed the arrival of French colonial troops after the war and its planned casino in the *Résidence des Pins* was bought by the French government to house the its governor general, and is at present the residence of the French ambassador to Lebanon. During the next World War, Lebanon declared its independence and the Hippodrome then enjoyed Lebanon's "Golden Era" of the 1950s and 1960s.

Unfortunately, and like much of the city, it did not escape the tragedies of the Lebanese Civil War (1975 1990). In the first years of the conflict, the Hippodrome temporarily closed before again becoming an antidote to growing sectarianism. From 1977 until 1982 it stayed open and hosted races despite being located at a crossroad dividing three rival armed militias representing three different religious sects (Sunni, Shiite and Maronite Christian). Unofficial truces allowed the races to continue, once again proving how Beirut's horses can bring the city together.

Disaster then struck in 1982 during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Suspecting the Hippodrome was being used as a hiding place by Palestinian fighters, the Israeli army shelled the grandstand, the Pine Forest and the nearby stables. Ten of the three hundred horses present were killed. Beirut's horse owners nevertheless managed to organise a remarkable truce in order to evacuate the remaining horses, with the help of political pressure by Lebanese president Elias Sarkis and American "special envoy" Philip Habib.

After the war ended, a new grandstand was built, albeit a slightly watered down version of Alfred Sursock's once grand design. But the races go on as before, attracting hundreds of spectators and gamblers every week.

Heritage activists, however, worry that Beirut's municipality – which still owns the



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domain – could decide to turn the vast terrain into a major commercial development. “Many new projects have been mentioned, among them ‘Beirut Central Park,’” says author and APLH activist El Khoury. “Most of those projects don’t envision removing the Hippodrome as such, but they do want to change its image. The municipality is sometimes tempted to change its function as a green and public space, to include a golf course or an artificial lake. Everything that defines the charm of the present Hippodrome would go. Some of them want to turn it into a grand VIP club.”

For now, the Hippodrome stands tall as a rare unifier of Lebanon’s population, as new development plans have not yet materialised. Both the middle classes who fill the grandstand and the horse owners – often belonging to Lebanon’s old “aristocratic dynasties” – want to make sure the races go on; while heritage organisations work to ensure that any proposed

plans to change things are intensely contested.

And so, in its own unique way, the Beirut Hippodrome and its magnificent Arabian pure bred horses offer a glimpse of hope in a region that is better known for its political and religious struggles.

Indeed, sports have more than once acted as a unifying factor in the region, as is evident by the stardom and pan Arab appeal of Egyptian football player Mohamed Salah. The Hippodrome has however proven itself to be a much better venue for peace and understanding than the football stadiums of Lebanon, where for years football games were played without any supporters in the stands in a bid to avoid scuffles between fans of opposing sides. “Here at the Hippodrome, we just come, sit and smoke; we chat, and study how the horses are doing,” smiles Kareem, a shop assistant. “And in the end, we leave just a little bit poorer than we were before, after having had a good time.”

## Children’s Games in Tunisia – Happy Memories

Mahdi Abdel Jawad

Playing is an activity that is vital for every child’s development. While playing and having fun, children use the dynamic energy of their bodies as well as their mental capacities. While children play, they start to engage with their environment and at the same time are often required to be creative, especially if resources are limited.

This is why children’s games in Tunisia, the same as everywhere else, vary according to different socio economic, religious, and even climatic surroundings. Games played in the cities differ from those played in the countryside, by the sea or in the desert. Moreover, games are usually inventions of children themselves. Children build toys with simple tools and materials, depending on what is available to them, or make up their own role plays, which function according to rules they have agreed upon.

Similarly, customs, traditions and social values influence the games children play. For example, strict social norms regarding what a

boy or a girl should do and how children should behave according to their gender influence children’s playing behaviors and games. Hence, in certain circumstances, and sometimes depending on social background, play can also be determined by geographical area, boys and girls play together in one place and in another, they play separately from each other. Many times boys and girls, who used to play with each other in their childhood, stop doing so when they get older and gender stereotypes start to leave their marks on them.

Girls tend to leave their homes less frequently as they get older, which consequently puts them under tighter social control. At the same time, boys stay outside and tend to play games that require more physical ability as they grow stronger. In this way, games played by boys and by girls start to differ.

Aside from games that can be found all over the world, such as “hide and seek,” marbles and cards, there are games particular to Tunisia, a few of which are outlined below.

### The Five Stone Game

This game, which is played with five usually smooth and small stones, tests the agility skills of children and can be played in a variety of ways. Most commonly, a player picks up the stones with one hand and throws them into the air (typically no higher than half of a meter to a meter). The player then must catch one of the stones with the back of his or her hand. With a swinging movement of the arm the player throws that stone in the air again and then very quickly has to pick up one of the stones that lie on the table before catching the other stone again. This goes on until the player holds all the stones in his or her hand.



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### The Seven Stones

This game is played in two teams and revolves around a small tower of seven stones. The first team ("red"), has to hit the tower with a small rubber ball from a distance. As soon as the tower crumbles, the game starts. The red team diffuses and the second team ("blue") starts to throw the same ball at the members of the red team. If someone is hit by the ball, that player is out of this round of the game. At the same time, and in the midst of ball attacks by the blue team, the red team has to rebuild the tower. If the players of the red team succeed in rebuilding the tower, they win. However, if all players of the red team are hit before they rebuilt the tower, the blue team wins. This game can also be found in other countries of the region.

### Al Nafkha The Blow

In this game, cards with pictures of animals, soccer players, historical figures or cartoon characters, which usually come with food products, are placed face down on the ground in front of a wall. Bent on the ground, children start blowing air under the cards and towards the wall, attempting to overturn them. If someone succeeds in flipping a card with his or her breath, that person is the winner and gets the card..

### The Judge and the Thief

Children often play this game at school. It starts with ripping four pieces of paper of equal size from their school notebooks, on which they write judge, thief, inspector and executer. Afterwards, the pieces of paper are folded and shuffled. Each child picks one and has to play the character written on the piece of paper. The inspector has to find out who the thief is by asking questions of the others and by creating a discussion among the players over what has happened. The inspector must eventually guess who the thief is, a guess sometimes inspired by the disclosing body language of the thief. If the inspector is correct, he or she wins. The judge then convicts the accused thief and decides his or her punishment. This is often the most fun part of the game. The thief has to comply with the judge and fulfill the sentence, which is usually a challenge to do something ridiculous or funny, like telling a joke or singing a song. The executer ensures the thief complies. However, if the inspector was wrong, the thief is pardoned and the inspector is punished in the same way. This game often evolves into Shakespearean drama and requires no resource apart from imagination.

### Al Gercha – ("Bite" in the Southern Tunisian dialect)

This is a game that is played in the oases of the Sahara, in Tunisia's south, where the famous "Nour Dates" (Diglet Nour) come from. The game is very simple, and children use only the materials they get from the Nour palm tree. During date season, children collect the dates that fall from the trees and mark one of them by biting in it. Afterwards, they shuffle the dates and burry them under the soft sand. Next, they take the long and sharp spires of the palm leaves and ram them into the sand. The child who catches the date with the bite mark wins.

### Banni Banni

Banni Banni is the name of a homemade firework that is commonly constructed for national or religious holidays. Children use old iron keys, which are hollow and open at the top. They then use a long nail, a thread and matches to build the small firework. The sulfur of the matchsticks is scraped from the wooden sticks and stuffed inside the old key. Afterwards the nail is jammed inside the key so that the hole is sealed with the nail's head. The thread is fixed at both ends of the key to create a long handle to keep the explosion at a distance from the person that will trigger the Banni Banni. It bursts when the nail's head is slammed against a wall.

### Al Imthal – The Statu

This game is mostly played by girls. They dance and spin around until one of them counts, "one, two, three!" All the players must then immediately stop dancing and stand still. The one who stopped moving last is out of the game. The girls repeat this until only one of them remains (the winner).

# White Elephants and Corruption: The History of Mega Sporting Events in Lebanon

Danyel Reiche



**Dr Danyel Reiche** is an Associate Professor for Comparative Politics at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. His work focusses on sport policy and politics as well as on climate policies. Reiche's book "Success and Failure of Countries at the Olympic Games" was published with Routledge in 2016. In 2019, his book "Sport, Politics and Society in the Middle East" (co-edited with Tamir Sorek) will be published with Hurst and Oxford University Press.

After the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), the multi religious country hosted four mega sporting events: two multi sport events – the Pan Arab Games in 1997 and the Francophone Games in 2009; and two continental championships in football and basketball – the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Asian Cup in 2000 and the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) Asia Cup in 2017. The events illustrate the different identities of Lebanon as an Arab, Asian, and Francophone country.

The Lebanese government and particularly Rafiq Hariri, prime minister from 1992–1998 and 2000–2004, supported the bids for the 1997 Pan Arab Games, the 2000 AFC Asian Cup, and the 2009 Francophone Games as symbols of rebuilding the country and post war recovery. The initial idea was to host the three mega sporting events within a brief period. However, Lebanon's first two bids for the Francophone Games in 2001 and 2005 were unsuccessful. Unlike the events in 1997, 2000, and 2009, the government was not behind the bid the FIBA Asia Cup 2017; the initiative came solely from the basketball federation. However, the government eventually supported the event.

## Small and Developing Countries as Hosts

The academic literature on mega sporting events neglects the role of small, developing countries as hosts. While there is a rich body of academic literature on mega sporting events, most of this work focuses on the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games that are mainly hosted by large, developed countries such as Germany, Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom. A recent trend is that these events are also being hosted by emerging countries such as Brazil (World Cup 2014, Summer

Olympic Games 2016), China (Summer Olympic Games 2008, Winter Olympic Games 2022), and South Africa (FIFA World Cup 2010) that have large populations and maintain leading roles in regional politics. An exception to this trend is Qatar, a small country with a population of about 2.5 million people (a clear majority of whom are not citizens of the country) that will host the FIFA World Cup 2022. However, Qatar is economically very strong and per capita income in the Gulf country is the highest in the world.

Only twenty-four countries have ever hosted Summer or Winter Olympics in the entire history of the Games (1896–2018). The remaining 182 National Olympic Committees (NOCs) that were recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in September 2018 have never hosted the games. While some emerging countries such as South Africa and India may be hosts in the future, a clear majority of countries will most likely never be able to host the Games due to their economy, geography, climate, or other factors.

The FIFA Men's World Cup was even hosted by fewer countries than the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. In 2018 and 2022 Russia and Qatar will be the seventeenth and eighteenth countries, respectively, to host the FIFA World Cup, a tournament that began in 1930. This means that only 8.53 percent of the 211 FIFA members (as of September 2018) have ever hosted the Men's World Cup.

By mainly focusing on the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games, events that are classified in the literature as "Tier 1 sports mega events," research neglects two important characteristics of mega sporting events: first, a vast majority of mega sporting events are continental and regional games ("Tier 2" and "Tier 3" events, as they are known) and second, not all hosts are large, developed nation states.

Many Tier 2 and Tier 3 events are hosted by small, developing countries that are often considered part of the global periphery. For these nations, continental and regional games are the most they can achieve as a host country of mega-sporting events.

## All About Prestige

By hosting the Pan Arab Games in 1997, the AFC Asian Cup in 2000, the Francophone Games in 2009, and the FIBA Asian Cup in 2017, sport became a symbol of Lebanon's post war recovery and for rebuilding the country. Rebuilding the Sports City Stadium in Beirut, destroyed by Israeli bombs during the civil war, was of major symbolic importance in that it showcased Lebanon's economic and political achievements in post war reconstruction. Winning the bid for the AFC Asian Cup in 2000 against Asian powerhouse China was a remarkable success for Lebanon. Members from foreign governments and presidents from sports governing bodies such as the IOC and FIFA visited Lebanon for the events, making these an effective soft power tool for the small country.

Lebanon proved that it can organize major events and, as one member of the government framed it, is "back on the world map." The events gave Lebanon regional (Pan Arab Games), continental (AFC Asian Cup, FIBA Asian Cup), and partly global (Francophone Games, AFC Asian Cup) exposure. Members of the Lebanese government used the opening ceremonies as an opportunity to portray to the world that the Mediterranean nation state is a diverse, democratic, and tolerant country.

## The Flipside of Mega Events

However, some articles published in the domestic and international press prior to and during the events were less favorable toward the host country. Negative media coverage began prior to the events when many reports expressed concerns that the facilities would not be ready in time. During the tournaments, many in the media pointed out the low number of spectators attending the matches, even comparing the stadiums to cemeteries. Poorly attended events are attributed not only to the absence of many international stars competing, but also to the lack of sporting success of local athletes that prevented a temporary "feel good factor" and sense of national pride in a divided country.

## Affording a White Elephant

While the idea behind the Pan Arab Games is to make a statement for Arab unity, banning Iraq from participation and spectator violence in the football final between Jordan and Syria in 1997 showcased tensions within the Arab world that became even worse in the two decades following the event. The main failure of the 1997 Pan Arab Games, the 2000 AFC Asian Cup, and the 2009 Francophone Games is the absence of a legacy management program that deals with the post event use of the facilities. While the venue of the 2017 FIBA Asian Cup will be utilized by a local basketball team, the International Olympic stadium in Tripoli is a "white elephant" that has hardly been used since the AFC Asian Cup in 2000 – a prohibitively expensive yet largely unused venue. Maintenance budgets have become tools for stealing money while the facilities are dirty and rusty, reflecting the serious problem of corruption in Lebanon.

# Moving Moroccan Culture Policy from the Hands of the Elite to Everyone Else's

Salma Belkebir

## Grow the Grassroots

Overall, there is a mixed picture when assessing Lebanon's experiences with hosting mega sporting events, with some short term image gains but few indications of long term benefits for the country. During FIBA Asia 2017, Lebanon's President Michel Aoun said that his country "is willing to host any regional or international sports tournaments," but I believe that Lebanon should take a more critical stand and give priority to youth and grassroots sports programs before hosting other mega sporting events. If Lebanon does host other mega sporting events, it should consider co-hosting them with other countries to limit the risks.

There are some broader conclusions that also apply to other host countries of Tier 2 and Tier 3 mega sporting events, particularly those that are small and moderately developing like Lebanon. Governments from around the world tend to focus on the potential gains and to ignore the risks of hosting mega sporting events. In non-democratic countries, there is typically no critical discourse around the bidding processes. While hosting Tier 2 and Tier 3 mega sporting events may have some short term promotional benefits for the country, the case of Lebanon shows the difficulties in generating enthusiasm beyond the competitions, the lack of strategies for the post event use of facilities, and the financial burden on the government for building and maintaining stadiums and sports halls.

## Co Hosting a Shared Burden

One could argue that small, developing countries, such as Lebanon, which struggle to provide their populations with basic needs, should not host mega sporting events. However, a proposed alternative is co hosting future events with other countries. Just eleven days after FIBA Asia 2017 in Lebanon concluded, the continental championship in European basketball started and set an excellent example for the future of Tier 2 and Tier 3 mega sporting events. EuroBasket 2017 was hosted by four countries: Finland, Israel, Romania, and Turkey. Two years earlier, EuroBasket 2015 was the first European basketball championship to be hosted by more than one country: matches took place in Croatia, France, Germany, and Latvia. While Lebanon hosted the AFC Asian Cup in 2000 by itself, the continental football championship in Europe, the Euro, was co hosted by Austria and Switzerland in 2008, countries with similar populations to Lebanon, and by Poland and Ukraine in 2012. These examples demonstrate that multinational hosting is gaining popularity. Co hosting may increase local community acceptance, an important feat given the growing skepticism in many countries toward hosting large scale sporting events. Apart from reducing costs and avoiding "white elephants," joint bids also enhance cooperation between countries, a positive effect particularly for regions such as the Middle East that are characterized more by conflict than cooperation.

Whether we ask about state attempts to define a cultural model, or the crumbling it has seen – and which we have been witnessing for over 30 years now – the question of culture in Morocco has always been about politics. Certainly, big budget festivals like Mawazine, Tanjazz and Jazzablanca allow for due *divertissements*; but what happened to the founding of a general cultural policy at the hands of the citizens? What happened to the breeding grounds for flourishing creativity, such as youth and cultural centers, which are now barely operational and do not form tomorrow's citizens?

This Moroccan cultural scene – which has fostered music's big names and great painters, actors, writers and filmmakers – is in constant agony. Who does not know Nass El Ghiwane, Abdellatif Laâbi, Mohammed Hassan al-Jundi, or Fatema Mernissi? Who does not know Mohamed Rouicha, Hadda Ouakki or Najat Aâtoubou? These leading figures, and so many others, have brought the national and popular culture to its height. When it comes down to it, what significance is given to cultural politics in Morocco? What do these policies call for and what do they represent? And if a genuine social project is not clearly outlined, defined and voted upon, how can it even hatch?

In this article, I will voice my humble opinion on Morocco's (not so-) cultural politics; the scene is set, so to speak, and ready to unveil what hinders its development. We will concentrate on a project, which is not among the least: "Rabat's Grand Theatre" built as a national icon to house the culture of the capital. Finally, we will try to define how these major urban development projects can contribute to the (not so-) cultural policies' dehumanisation; why it is so important to understand the significance, foundations and applications of the term "culture," and to invest in it sustainably.

## Examination of a Cultural Policy

Trying to define what a "cultural policy" is, we might say that it is "the set of strategies implemented in order to translate the cultural priorities of the city and of its individuals. Naturally, this strategy is constructed for the territory and its urban framework according to its context, history and civil society." Hence, the reader will notice that the historical, human and territorial dimensions are paramount.<sup>1</sup>

In our national context, we have, on the one hand, a heritage still being defined, and on the other its experiential expression by means of cultural politics. Looking at the comparative history of cultural politics, one notes that any coherence between the two struggles to be found or clearly defined. In short, culture has not always been at the forefront of political concerns, being this misplaced object grafted onto the ministerial departments.

The culture professional, visual artist and Doctor of Aesthetics and Art History, Said Bouftass, has said that "Today, we see the pedagogical lack from which this term suffers. We are light years away from the sense-making where culture allows humans to build themselves, to stimulate our intelligence, and to create bridges between peoples and civilizations."<sup>2</sup>

Until 1968, our "Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts" was responsible for "culture" and exerted its authority by means of various services inherited from the former protectorate's "Directorate of Public Instruction," wrote ethnologist and sociologist André Adam in his contemporary chronicle of "Cultural Policy in Morocco." By decree on 8 July 1968, Mohammed el-Fassi – previously Minister of National Education in the first Moroccan



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government, at the time Rector of the Moroccan Universities – was appointed “State Minister in charge of Cultural Affairs and Traditional Teaching.” Adam continues: “On 13 April 1972, a new amendment includes culture in the ‘Ministry of Traditional, Higher and Secondary Teaching,’ which falls to Habib el-Fihri. Finally, on 25 April 1974, culture is separated from Islamic Affairs and Habous and returns to the ‘State Minister in charge of Cultural Affairs,’ Mohammed Bahnini.”<sup>3</sup>

Culture remained subject to the Ministry of the Interior until 1992, when the Ministry of Cultural Affairs gained its independence. Questions of artistic expression and creation were then put on hold for many years to come – that is, despite the simultaneous development of an alternative cultural scene. Accordingly, only following the 1998 changeover in government do we speak again of a “Ministry of Culture.” Several ministers took turns at this – each with a vision of culture different from the previous – before Mohamed Amine Sbihi took over from 2012 to 2016 in pursuit of his “Strategy of Cultural Morocco.” We will get back to this later to further develop and understand his predominant challenges.

At the end of the day – when working on the promotion of a book and meeting culture professionals of regional directorates, or on the preservation of heritage – we speak about cultural governance. In Morocco, the lack of a coherent and long-term political vision of culture is a standing obstacle to the achievement of anything, big or small.

On the one hand, all this ministerial shuffling has contributed to the dispersion of cultural policies, given that each program put in place was often disconnected from the previous; On the other hand, they have reaffirmed the difficulty of deploying sustainable cultural

action, which is still struggling to find its place, given the lack of funds and a long-term vision. Any strategy should be based on a vision, and a depoliticized vision of culture would only serve to further empty it of what it is that makes it a vision.

Mohamed Amine Sbihi’s cultural strategy is certainly worth looking at, basing itself on five key points: community culture, support of artistic endeavors, promotion of heritage, cultural diplomacy and good governance. Speaking about cultural governance, we find ourselves in a managerial approach to culture that is totally disconnected from local realities, which checks the conception of a public cultural policy as frail and incomplete.<sup>4</sup>

During my mandate as the president of a cultural association DABATEATR, from 2015 to 2017 – I was able to see firsthand how some bodies within the Ministry of Culture stifle certain initiatives with bureaucracy; even to the point of calling into question the promise of lasting support advocated by the ministry. It should also be noted that in Morocco, art and culture organizations can in no way rely on sparse national funds (less than 1% of the national budget is allocated to culture), and that consequently, it is foreign funding that keeps them alive.

In 2018, the Ministry of Culture is investing 330 MDH in culture (€ 30 million), while the Bouregreg Valley Development Agency is investing 120 MDH in the unique Rabat Grand Theatre project. In a country where cultural infrastructure at the local level is very poor, these numbers show that we are far from those portfolios, which would allow for an implementation of real strategies for artistic production beyond occasional activities (festivals and *moussems*), even building and investing in performance spaces. It should be



pointed out that Morocco has launched the construction of 54 cultural institutions between 2012 and 2016, which is truly commendable, but not still sufficient. Nevertheless, those walls need to be reinforced through the training of qualified human resources that might staff work within them, and through the professional involvement of the artists (including painters, choreographers, writers and filmmakers) with whom this country abounds. Investing in continuous training, such as apprenticeships, at the option of young artists – so that they may measure themselves and be inspired by the light of other competences – is another necessity.

In most cases, these sparse and insufficient amounts cannot afford the actual “mounting of artistic projects”, which includes writing, dramaturgy, staging, music, technical and artistic assistance, per diem of artists, and more.

“Without a doubt, the Ministry of Culture should consider not distributing crumbs to several theatre companies, but to choose those which deserve to see their finished works presented to the public,” says Rabat-based choreographer and cultural activist Salima Moumni. This optimist and dreamer in love with her country longs to see more weight and more space given to choreographic arts in Morocco. If today, dance is an art in its own right, ten years ago it was non-existent as a discipline within the Ministry of Culture, Salima reminds us; she recognizes the evolution of this art, but deplores the state’s lack of engagement in public cultural policy. All the same, she hopes that the new academy of music and dance will be a venerable place of professional training, and finishes our interview – as if stating a common fact – by concluding that ‘there are no cultural politics, only artists fighting on their own, like

madmen’. Madmen – or homeless, as Moroccan writer Ahmed Massaia would say: “The artist still suffers from being a homeless person, dragging around on his back his creation, as an unwanted baggage.” Giving more visibility to talented artists, and focusing less on elitist cultural patronage – towards which also our country gravitates – are the priorities. I consider it above all prerequisite that our cultural policies are in line with the kind of society we want to build in this country, torn as it is today between a grandiloquent and exclusive vision of culture, and the need to give Moroccan citizens the long- and much-advocated democratization of culture.<sup>5 6</sup>

In this regard, Said Bouftass argues that “Culture is the wholeness of a kind of society, the complex motor of human action. A child of today, having benefitted from culture, is guaranteed to be a citizen on whom society can count a decade later.” Why do people blow themselves up on the borders of spatial lawlessness? Why is it urgent to think about not “bringing culture” to the forgotten areas of Sidi Moumen, Sidi Taibi or El Kelaa des Sraghna – but to reinstate it in the social fabric.<sup>7</sup>

This gap is well illustrated by grandiose projects, such as the Rabat Grand Theatre.

## Commoditization of Culture: The Rabat Grand Theatre Project

Morocco’s administrative capital, Rabat, has for several years been undergoing important socio-spatial and urban transformations within the framework of the urban development project “Rabat – City of Lights” (*“Rabat Ville Lumière”*), initiated by the Rabat Region Development Agency. Several major projects

have been launched, such as the Rabat Grand Theatre, which was designed by the late British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, a superstar of international architecture and first woman to receive the Pritzker Prize in 2004.<sup>8</sup>

This project, which was launched as part of phase 2 – *“al-Sahat al-Kabira”* of the Bouregreg Valley development project and amounts to 1.4 billion MDH (€ 120 million) – was conceived as the capital’s new architectural and urban landmark. As Territorial Development scholar Leïla Hamidi pointed out, the then-Director of the Bouregreg Valley Development Agency Lemghari Essaki stated in 2010 that the Rabat Grand Theatre project “was going to compete with the world’s biggest cultural structures in terms of architecture and acoustic equipment.” “The main objective of this future development is clearly to conceive a monumental cultural edifice in order to lift [the capital of the kingdom] into the ranks of great cultural capitals of the Mediterranean,” concludes Hamidi.<sup>9</sup>

Thus it has been made clear that the main objective of this theatre may not be to make this space a place of artistic flourishing – one of training, teaching and education in the name of culture – but in fact to improve the city’s image, maximize its competitive position among the Mediterranean metropolises, and ultimately to attract the interest of national and international investors. The culture of our era is clearly that of the image. Likewise, the 2020 vision for strategic development of the tourism sector in Morocco highlights the introduction of investments and building projects in order to improve the competitive position of Moroccan cities.

This notwithstanding, can we allow – as a developing country in 123rd place on the Human Development Index – to invest this amount of money, some of which comes from

taxpayers, in improving the capital’s brand image? A strange order of priority.

The Rabat Grand Theatre project is not part of a vision of creating an artistic and cultural link between the impoverished youths of the popular Salé and Rabat Medina neighborhoods. These young people need spaces for art creation, rehearsals and teaching; just as the theatre groups need venues to perform their acts; filmmakers, movie theatres to project their films; and painters, small galleries to make themselves known. Many arts professionals yearn to consecrate their time, and to teach tomorrow’s citizens what art and culture education is.

Now, from the perspective of the architect, there are two points that I would like to emphasize: Firstly, that this project, with its futuristic architecture, is out of touch; for one thing with the landscaping potential of the Bouregreg Valley, for another with the local socio-economic context. Secondly, how does an international architecture agency permit an operational delay of more than four years? One answer might be that of Nabil Rahmouni, architect and Director of the association *Sala Moustaqbal*, when speaking of the subject of phase 1 – “Bab el-Bahr,” which was intended to accommodate upscale housing. According to Leïla Hamidi, Rahmouni explained that “only French and foreign companies and consulting firms were petitioned as prime contractors. However, the labor force employed on the construction sites is of local origin, and therefore accustomed to the traditional construction techniques used in Morocco. Thus, the overlay of construction techniques meeting international standards and a local workforce creates many inconsistencies and bottlenecks on Bouregreg’s current construction sites.” We

may conclude that the outsourcing of work to foreign consulting firms and prime contractors created major delays on the construction site, with a consequential increase in construction costs.<sup>10</sup>

This Grand Theatre project thus leads us to ask several questions: For whom is this space built? To what kind of socio-cultural activities will it be dedicated? And WHO will be its users? Answering these questions, to which we already dispose of quite illuminating observations, helps us understand how (not so-) cultural transmission policy is organized in our country, and to what extent – through these kinds of projects being ourselves part of a neo-liberal and depoliticized cultural policy – getting involved in “ONE CULTURE FOR ALL” truly becomes at the same time urgent and complex.

Let’s Invest in Culture!

Culture is neither superfluous, nor an object we can do without; and it is so important to be aware of that. Addressing this matter, cultural anthropologist Amina Touzani argues that “Even if we fear to state it categorically, our governments conceive of culture as a ‘bourgeois’ luxury for those who practice it, and a superfluous *divertissement* for those whose interest it attracts, instead of viewing it as a factor of inclusion and a dimension of life. As soon as other priorities come into the picture, the financing of culture is quickly and gladly worn away. Every time, it took ten years, twenty years, and more, of postponing certain – to our best belief – albeit viable projects. This is the case of the National Library, of the National Museum, and others...” In my opinion, it is this elitist vision of culture we need to overcome today in order to push an inclusive culture, which allows for an egalitarian social development in equal favor of the privileged, deprived and exposed social classes.<sup>11</sup>

Culture is this vector of encounters and social coherence, it is the motor of diversity. Culture is that which makes it possible to stir awareness and build informed citizens who question their being in the world. Culture calls for goodness and graciousness, reveals hidden talents and gives voice to our deepest desires.

Culture is what defines us as a group of individuals, that which joins us, brings us together and differentiates us. It is above all a mirror of the development of our societies, so that to defend an inclusive concept of culture is to participate in a better, egalitarian and unified Morocco.

1 Definition given by the Cultural Agency of Grand Est, France ([http://www.culture.territoires.org/contextualisation/politique\\_culturelle/definition](http://www.culture.territoires.org/contextualisation/politique_culturelle/definition)).

2 Comment made to the author by Said Bouftass on 16 September 2018

3 Adam, A.: ‘La politique culturelle au Maroc’, p. 107-129 in *Annuaire de l’Afrique du Nord*, Editions du Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique 1973, see also [http://aan.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/Pdf/AAN\\_1973\\_12-43.pdf](http://aan.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/Pdf/AAN_1973_12-43.pdf)

4 Transl. from the French: *La culture de proximité, le soutien à la création, la valorisation du patrimoine, la diplomatie culturelle et la bonne gouvernance*. Cf. [https://www.medias24.com/CULTURE\\_LOISIRS/150191-Le-Maroc-lance-une-strategie-culturelle-qui-rompt-avec-les-visions-folklorisantes.html](https://www.medias24.com/CULTURE_LOISIRS/150191-Le-Maroc-lance-une-strategie-culturelle-qui-rompt-avec-les-visions-folklorisantes.html)

5 Interview with Salima Moumni in Rabat on 12 September 2018.

6 Massaia, A.: *Un désir de culture. Essai sur l’action culturelle au Maroc*, Edition la croisée des chemins 2013

7 Comment made by Said Bouftass on 16 September 2018

8 Major architecture prize awarded annually, referred to as the Nobel Prize of architecture

9 Hamidi, L.: *LE PROJET D’AMENAGEMENT DE LA VALLEE DU BOUREGREG : UN PROJET SOCIAL ? Focus sur les populations des pêcheurs, poissonniers et barcassiers*. Polytech’Tours 2011. P.47

10 Ibid. p. 46

11 Touzani, A., *La politique culturelle au Maroc*, Ed La Croisée des Chemins, 2016

# Art and Culture: An Alternative to Violent Sectarian Conflicts?

Lea Baroudi

Tripoli – Lebanon’s second largest city after the capital Beirut – has suffered from decades of unrest, instability and violent clashes fueled by deep rooted sectarian divides. The two most impoverished neighborhoods, the Sunni majority Beb el-Tebbeneh and the Alawite majority Jabal Mohsen, have undergone dozens of rounds of violent clashes over the four decades.

UN Statistics show that 69 percent of families in Jabal Mohsen and 87 percent in Beb el-Tebbeneh live in poverty. This is where the Lebanese non governmental organization MARCH set out to achieve conflict resolution through arts and culture.

The conflict between residents of the two neighborhoods began with the start of the Lebanese Civil War. Apart from the sectarian divide, today the two communities support opposite sides of the conflict in Syria, which has further exacerbated the unrest and violence in Tripoli since 2011. Ironically, the street dividing both neighborhoods is called “Syria Street”, and it saw the most violent clashes in this most recent round of fighting.

## From the Trenches of Jabal Mohsen and Beb el-Tebbeneh to Center Stage

That’s when MARCH went up to Tripoli and held auditions for more than 100 potential candidates from Jabal Mohsen and Beb el-Tebbeneh to act in a theater play. We ended up selecting 16 finalists, 8 from each community. Their profiles were almost identical: they were 16-25 years old, they had left school early, most of them participated in the armed clashes and all of them were unemployed. This particular

profile, sadly, was not difficult to find.

The idea we had was simple: Have these young Tripolitans star in a dark comedy based on their lives and circumstances and tour it across Lebanon. The plan was to give them a platform to vent their concerns, but also to let other Lebanese hear their side of the story, without mentioning the word reconciliation as a desired outcome for the group.

The recruitment part was the first and possibly hardest part. “I’ve never been to a play and you want me to act in one?” one of the newly recruited actors asked, unable to understand how we could be fit to perform on stage or why anyone would care enough to come watch him perform. That particular sentence was very telling as to the sense of loss of self esteem that these young people feel.

Persuading the recruits to stick to the rehearsals was tough, besides the initial absences and tardiness, the mood was tense, and I still recall the surreal experience of performing body searches at the door of the rehearsal hall to make sure the young men were unarmed: Guns, knives and razor blades were confiscated. These were men who saw themselves as mortal enemies, filled with anger at their circumstances, and many of them have been carrying a gun since the age of 15. Weapons and violence were part of what defined them as men and were the main avenues down which they channeled this anger.

The purpose of the play inspired by their lives was to allow them to share their stories and get to know each other, give them a real sense of worth, as well as channel their anger and grievances into a peaceful, more constructive outlet.

To achieve that, over a period of 6 months, our volunteers were trained by many prominent drama and theater professionals. MARCH hired



Lea Baroudi is a founding Member and Director of MARCH, a Lebanese non-profit organization that seeks to engender tolerance, foster diversity, and promote freedom of expression in Lebanon. A certified professional mediator, Ms. Baroudi specializes in inter-faith and sectarian mediation and has initiated and worked actively on peace-building projects that use art, culture and economic development to resolve conflict and counter radicalization among youth in Lebanon.



Lucien Bourjeily to write and direct the play and help mold the fighters into stage actors. George Khabbaz, Nadine Labaki, Rafic Ali Ahmad and Rita Hayek all leading actors and directors in theater and cinema, visited the youth during the rehearsals and conducted workshops and discussion sessions to give the young men and women more guidance and advice and help them build more confidence on stage.

And slowly but surely, by sharing their stories with us and each other, these young men realized they were much more alike than they thought. After long months of perseverance and rehearsals, during which these would be actors distanced themselves from the violence that had consumed much of their youth, friendships were built, and the play – “Love and War on the Rooftop,” a local take on “Romeo and Juliet” – was born. The play toured across Lebanon with full house performances and standing ovations.

What began as a pilot project with just 16 people then grew into something bigger. More plays, several rap groups, graffiti artists, song writers, break dancers, and other arts and culture initiatives followed on the heels of “Love and War on the Rooftop.” These different and diverse undertakings allowed youth who were taught to hate each other, to meet and express their frustrations – as well as their hopes and dreams – through the arts.

While the participants were impacted most by this experience, the residents of both neighborhoods also felt the effect as saw the problems they face every day tackled on stage. With that, our participants had become activists, shedding light on the problems as they worked together on the solutions.

## A Cultural Café on the Former Front Lines

With so many projects ongoing, MARCH felt the need to create something more permanent and sustainable. We began working on a project that would add to the positive impact, while acting as a hub and safe space for the youth, addressing one of the main root causes of the conflict: fear of the other. In February 2016, MARCH opened the “*Kahwetna: Cafe bi Kaffak*” cultural cafe in a war torn building on the former frontline of Syria Street. Today, the cafe employs youth from both areas who jokingly tease each other on how they use to point guns at each other and now they point espresso, cameras or mics. The café also serves as a location for young men and women from the area to meet and unite around positive ideas, and to keep working, performing and learning together while spreading the message of peace to a wider audience. Residents of these neglected neighborhoods now have a safe space that allows them to express themselves together through art, culture and learning, away from sectarian and political manipulation.

Today the café hosts concerts, movie screenings, workshops, classes and festivals, all organized by the youth and for the youth of both communities.

## The Example of Beb el-Dahab

Though the approach of art and culture has shown to be highly effective, it can only contribute to sustainable change if it is accompanied by an improvement in the youth’s poor socio economic conditions, and by making young people feel they have some control over their lives. This is what drove MARCH to initiate the project of Beb el-Dahab in late 2016. While working on peace building in the area, the MARCH team discovered that the neighborhoods of Beb el-Tebbeneh and Jabal Mohsen historically shared the name Beb el-Dahab (literally: Golden Gate), because

develop capacities and skills that they will be able to use after completing the project. The main philosophy behind Beb el-Dahab is that these former fighters, now armed with professional skills, are unlikely to fire on something they helped rebuild. The project has succeeded over several phases in rehabilitating around 200 shops with 230 youth working in the process, both men (working construction, for example) and women (designing shop signs and marketing materials, among other things).

To complement its initiative, MARCH accompanies the rehabilitation process with a lengthy soft skills program at “*Kahwetna*” that includes art, culture, sports and personal development, ranging from anger management, team building and drug awareness sessions, to



of the combined economic prosperity of the area before the civil war, a fact that can help the communities remember a common history of peaceful coexistence. The project brings together the most at risk young men and women from each neighborhood to rehabilitate shops on the former demarcation lines destroyed by violence, poverty and neglect over years of conflict

Apart from promoting peace building, the project aims at providing palpable change in people’s economic situations by helping them

cultural outings, and language classes for the youth as well as promoting sports as healthy means of encounter and outlet to people’s frustration and building bridges through the Beb el-Dahab Football Tournament. The tournament brings in around 12 mixed teams bi annually of former fighters from Beb el-Tebbeneh, Jabal Mohsen and Members of the Lebanese Army, to compete for the title, in order to contribute to building bridges between the LAF and the community.

The project has succeeded so far in

# The Circus: My Little Window in a Dark Locked Room

Hazar Azzeh

reconciling hundreds of youth from both areas, who now call themselves the “Beb el-Dahab squad,” proudly showing passers by the shops and signs they contributed in rehabilitating.

The success of the project comes from the fact that it addresses some of the main drivers that are leading the youth to resort to violence and radical ideologies. These include a lost sense of belonging and identity, limited education and very high illiteracy rates, perceived (or true) injustice and very poor socioeconomic conditions. These elements were suffocating any hope in the hearts and minds of these young adults, making them angry, vulnerable and more easily manipulated, leading them to resort to violence and to yield to radical, violent ideologies.

All of these youth were looking for income, but we found that they also longed for a sense of purpose and hope in the future. And its hopelessness that extremist groups seize upon to attract new recruits, offering them a new

identity, and a cause to fight for.

Challenging this requires a holistic approach to provide the youth with an alternative that is “cool” yet remains angry: a way to vent, a sense of purpose and empowerment, and the feeling of being heard and relevant. This approach may not convert the hardcore extremist leaders of any movement, but they have proven to be important tools in luring away some recruits.

Art, culture and personal development helped us create a third community out of the hardship of the two divided one.

It provided these youths with part of what missing from their lives: it broke down the barriers of fear, humanized them, helped them vent their anger and frustrations and it created a sense of belonging, purpose and self esteem. And most importantly it made people listen without judgement, it gave them a voice and made them feel relevant. It gave them hope in a better future. And that is the key to everything.

The circus has become part of my life since I joined 11 years ago. At first, I thought it was crazy to have a circus school in Palestine, but then I realized how unique and extraordinary it was to have a circus here. Everybody, in fact, thought that Shadi and Jessika were out of their minds for trying to start up a circus school. However, their faith in the abilities of young Palestinians and in the impact that a circus could have on them was much stronger than all the skepticism. Stubbornly following their own beliefs, they succeeded in contributing to a cultured and liberal artistic society.

The story of the Palestinian Circus School (PCS) began in 2006 when Shadi Zmorrod from Jerusalem met Jessika Devlieghere from Belgium and shared the dream of establishing a circus school in Palestine. Only ten people had signed up to participate in the first circus workshop, which was held in a small room in Ramallah. The group of ten quickly grew when they started teaching their own students in 2007. With the few skills they had learned, the students were eager to pass along their knowledge to others, especially the younger generations. That was exactly when my brother and I joined this little magical place, which later became our second home and our second big family.

Since then, the PCS has helped me become the person I am today, with all my failures and successes. It has accompanied me in every decision I had to make. It has taught me to love, respect, accept, and appreciate every person I meet, no matter the person's background. I could not agree more with the writer Robert Sugarman, author of “Circus for Everyone: Circus Learning Around the World,” when he says: “By turning you upside down, we teach you to stand on your own two feet. By dropping objects, we teach you to catch them. By making

you walk all over someone, we teach you to take care of others. By clowning around, we teach you to take yourself seriously.”

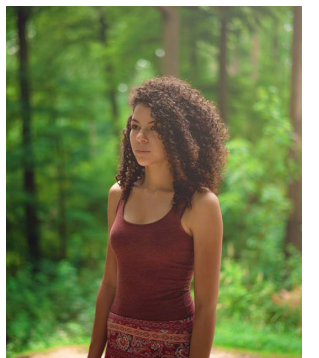
The circus was created to make the impossible possible. It was born out of Palestinians' desire to live a normal, creative, fulfilling life. Reality in Palestine seems to be one big circus, where people need to balance between life and death while navigating the many obstacles imposed on them by the occupation; a place where laughter hides deep sadness and where the right to be happy is a daily struggle.

Dignity, unity, respect, trust, and, most of all, hope are under serious threat. The occupation is devastating our lives, both as individuals and as a nation. However, we continue to believe that a future Palestine is possible, where people's dreams of a better life come true.

Our circus school aims to develop the creative potential of young people in Palestine to engage, empower, and strengthen their identity. We offer a safe space where children and youth meet in equality and work together to achieve meaningful results.

By teaching kids from a variety of backgrounds, we encourage the development of a new form of cultural expression and the rise of a new generation of artists in Palestine. We practice an art form that is both dynamic and experimental in nature and that aims to challenge traditional perceptions of the arts and artistic interactions. We offer an open space for creativity at all levels, encouraging strong participation of all people involved: students, trainers, volunteers, and the community at large.

I have watched the PCS evolve into a professional institution that teaches circus skills year round to more than 230 children and youth above the age of 6 from all over Palestine. They come with variable abilities and from different



**Hazar Azzeh** is 21 years old and a performer and part-time trainer at the Palestinian Circus School. She studied media, journalism and political science at Birzeit University. Hazar believes in the value of voluntary work, humans, equality, and the arts; and, in fact, she believes that art and social work have formed her. She has been a student at the Palestinian Circus School since she was 9 years old.



backgrounds, including ex detainees, children with intellectual disabilities, and refugees. PCS opens its doors to everyone because we strongly believe that we all have equal rights to access opportunities to learn, to improve our lives, and to experience joy. Each of us matters, and together we can improve our society. This is how we use our energy to create an inclusive society. Our art is not made just for the sake of art itself inside the walls of our circus school.

In addition to teaching, PCS has created a variety of productions that have been performed in Palestine and abroad, reaching over 110,000 people locally and internationally. This is how we have been able to share our pride, our dignity, and our hope as Palestinians.

By performing circus arts, we bring joy and laughter to the hearts of children who are barely given the chance to enjoy their childhood. We try to give our audiences the opportunity to think freely, dream with no limitation and forget for a moment all the difficulties and obstacles they face in their daily lives. Our message is the dream of a world where everyone fits in, a world without borders and free from occupation – physical and psychological.

The performance *Sarab* is a production by the Palestinian Circus School, directed by Paul Evans and presented by seven Palestinian Circus Artists. It reflects the history of Palestinian refugees, aiming to involve the audience in these stories, and make them feel what refugees go through, especially at a time when millions of refugees worldwide go through similar experiences.

After a PCS performance of *Sarab* in London, an audience member admitted: "I didn't want to continue watching, but I couldn't leave. You brought me into your own world, one that we've all been trying to blindly ignore. You slapped me in the face and woke me up." This is the kind

of impact that we try to have on our audience. Sometimes this kind of exposure is not all that pleasant, but what is important to us is that people react to what's happening around them. This is what we believe we can offer – raising awareness, spreading knowledge about certain issues, and inspiring people to take action.

This year (2018) we overcame the challenge of organizing the second Palestine Circus Festival, bringing local and international circus artists together with Palestinian society, united to call for freedom. More than 25,300 Palestinian children, youth and families attended 31 shows and lived the stories we created in our small training halls. Unfortunately, we had to cancel one of the shows which was supposed to be performed in Jerusalem, because the Israeli occupation authorities refused to issue permits for two of the Palestinian performing artists. In addition, they also prevented six members from three of our partner circus crews in Gaza from traveling to the West Bank and joining us. We actually have never had the chance to meet them in person due to these restrictions and simply know them from communications via social media, and picture and video sharing. As an alternative to us performing in this part of our homeland, we have organized two events in Gaza for these three crews. Some 2100 spectators came to see them, a big achievement. We succeeded in creating joy even if it was fleeting.

Circus for us is a tool of resisting the occupation and the injustice. It might not free Palestine, but it frees the mind and offers an escape from the inhumanity Palestinians face daily.

For me personally, I sleep better at night when I know I have succeeded in spreading joy and happiness during the day.



# Wigs against the Patriarchy

Inga Hofmann



Picture by: Aivin Hans  
Opening show of SARAB performance by PCS 2018

For more information, contact the PCS at 02-281-2000, +970-59-281-2001, or [info@palcircus.ps](mailto:info@palcircus.ps), or visit [www.palcircus.ps](http://www.palcircus.ps), Facebook: The Palestinian Circus School, or Instagram: The Palestinian Circus School.

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Bassem Feghali is one of the most popular Lebanese TV stars, famous for his impersonations of Arab celebrities such as Fairuz and Nancy Ajram but also of international personalities like Britney Spears or Marilyn Monroe. Although his use of wigs, feminine clothing and makeup means that he does not conform to traditional male gender stereotypes, he has gained extraordinary popularity on social networks like Facebook and Lebanon’s LBC TV station even gave him his own show during Ramadan, ‘*Alf Wayle Bi Layle*’ where Feghali impersonated various international celebrities. The title loosely translates to “1000 fooleries in a night” and is a word play on “*Alf Layle ua Layl*”, “One Thousand and One Nights” or “Arabian Nights” as it is known in English.

Given the audience’s resoundingly positive reaction to Feghali, one could assume that the LGBTQ\* community in Lebanon is also treated with goodwill and that, by extension, an increasingly tolerant attitude towards taboos such as sexuality and gender can be expected. In actual fact, Feghali has, to this day, not come out to his (mostly heterosexual) fan base, and Lebanese media simply refer to him as an ‘entertainer’.

This restrictive label ignores the importance of the Lebanese drag queen scene. Many drag queens in Lebanon raise political issues and challenge the patriarchal system. Despite legal discrimination and a lack of tolerance for diversity when it comes to sexuality and gender, a scene that fundamentally questions heteronormative structures and takes a stand against the traditional concept of gendered roles in society has established itself in Beirut during the course of the past year.

Against the backdrop of article 534 in Lebanon which criminalises “sexual intercourse contrary to nature” and therefore, to this day, makes gender and sexual diversity a punishable

offence, drag shows which involve a conscious flouting of gender norms require great courage and grit. The law itself does not explicitly define the term “contrary to nature” and instead leaves it up to individual judges. However, based on the predominant heteronormative value system, anything queer – that is to say anything that does not fit the template of the ruling value system – is regarded as “contrary to nature” and therefore both unacceptable and subject of prosecution.

Although Lebanon is still dominated by the idea of male female duality along with traditional gender roles within families), drag queens question this concept during their performances by wearing clothing and cosmetics typically attributed to females. By donning wigs, make up, dresses, high heels, nail polish and jewellery, they offer a gender fluid and tolerant alternative to the predominant static and heteronormative world view.

Some proprietors make their clubs or bars available for these drag shows and, in doing so, give people the option to abandon the traditional gender roles society has forced them, slipping into a different persona as a drag queen. Neither the costumes nor the entertainment truly lie at the core of these events. Instead, the objective is to break social taboos. For example, sex and permissiveness take centre stage by means of unconventional clothing and as a result, these subjects are made approachable.

Through their choice of unconventional clothing, drag queens often risk public discrimination as well as conflict and even broken ties with their own family. Because family values are held in high regard in Lebanon, the majority of people aim to maintain the male female duality and a traditional family image. When it comes to gender and sexuality, diversity is not recognised and there is a widespread lack of



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knowledge about the subject itself. For example, this frequently leads to homosexuality and transgender being confused out of sheer ignorance. Traditionally, masculine attributes such as (physical) strength, dominance, heterosexuality and insensitivity are attributed to men. Anything that deviates from this static model is perceived as an indication of weakness and is therefore not accepted in society. This lack of acceptance within many families can lead to personal identity conflicts which arise from societal and familial pressures and can often-times only be resolved during the drag queen performances.

While social and familial pressures prevent living out part of one's own identity, these evenings uniquely create a platform for individuality and diversity. In addition, following their performance, each drag queen has the opportunity to comment and expand on their (political) background. These moments reveal that it is about much more than merely imitating famous people. For the stage is more often than not dominated by serious topics like suicide prevention, instead of entertaining jokes or comedic interludes. All in keeping with the principle: 'You are not alone, we have been through it as well and we're here for you.' That may sound cliché but, given the taboos on these subjects in all other facets of life, its impact should not be underestimated. The enormous familial and societal pressure frequently leads to depression or suicidal thoughts in those affected and professional therapeutic help is beyond financial reach for most drag queens. As a conversation about these problems with their family members would amount to outing themselves, most of the drag queens that struggle with psychological problems tend to not speak about it. Professional help, meanwhile, is expensive, and most could only cover with the support of their

parents, making it not really an option.

Against this background, the drag queen shows assume even greater political and social relevance. They provide the opportunity to exchange experiences with others as well as to lend support and be supported. And it is for good reasons that drag queens who pass on their experiences of performing and styling tips to younger individuals call their protégées 'drag kids' – an alternative family structure so to speak, a safe space in which identity conflicts can be resolved and where every day familial pressures fade into the background, at least for the evening.

Despite the provocative character of the drag scene, the performances primarily revolve around mutual support and living out one's own identity within a tolerant environment. In view of the rejection of the drag queen scene by the majority of the population, it appears even more impressive that it has resisted the influence of these negative attitudes. Instead, it stands for tolerance and respect and does so in a peaceful manner. This fundamentally positive attitude that breaks away from heteronormative and discriminatory social structures is most aptly summarised by Lady Gaga, an icon of the Lebanese drag scene, in her song "Born this Way" when she sings: "Don't be a drag, just be a queen!"



# Isn't Life just a MMORPG\*?

## \*Acronym for Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game

Tanite Chahwan

### The Lebanese "Network"

In Lebanon, during the late 90s, home computers were expensive. Internet connections were slow and costly. Networks or 'Computer Lounges became popular by offering easy access to computers at an affordable price. Internet use was 1000 LL (€ 0.57) an hour, and gaming was 500 LL (€ 0.26) an hour. The set up was there, games and computer software included, and staff offered customers guidance and solved technical problems. Soon enough Networks weren't just available in the cities, but became widespread, reaching villages, small towns, beach resorts, etc.

"Networks," as they were and remain locally called, had a huge impact on kids in the '90s. Online multi player games hadn't been created yet, therefore Networks gave players the opportunity to play multi player video games in a social context, forming new friendships while teaming up with other gamers.

Even though computer lounges might have faded away in some countries, probably because of the rise of online multi player games facilitated by cheap and super fast internet connections, Networks are still very present in the Lebanese gaming culture. While the costs of both gaming equipment and an internet connection play role in keeping Networks alive, gamers mostly appreciate the social aspect of attending.

Network goers prefer to play with and be surrounded by other gamers. They refer to each other by their game names. Playing at the Network is better than being home alone. "It's just more fun!" explained Karim Karam a 25 year old civil engineer known as *K*, "whether it's watching other players, interacting with them, or meeting up with your friends to play together." Gaming, contrary to common

belief, is not an entirely solitary hobby. Even for those who have a good set up at home, some would rather play at the Network, spending an average of 2 to 8 hours per visit. Charbel Nehme (*Charb*) a 32 year old who works in marketing and advertising, said it's become "a routine, a sanctum from daily life." He drives to the Network straight after work. "Gaming is like meditation to me, I also come here to see the guys, we do more than play games, we talk, we vent, we have fun."

With the invention of smartphones and tablets, and the constant availability of the Internet, Network customers are now exclusively gamers. And Networks look much different than they did in the '90s, with darker lighting, cooler posters, edgier and more sophisticated interior design, and comfier gaming chairs replacing the old basic plastic ones. As soon as you walk in, you're overtaken by a calm, dimly lit, bluish sci fi feel. But the Network becomes a paradox when the tranquil environment is interrupted by the players' vocal contempt, frustration, anger, excitement, fulfillment and even pure satisfaction. You can't help but enjoy observing how invested the gamers are as a unit. Players often take a quick smoke break outside, but I've been told that the indoor smoking ban is sometimes ignored during an intense game.

Although not as cheap as they were 20 years ago, gaming lounges today offer bundle pricing, and they've increased tenfold in presence. The hourly rate changed considerably, increasing from 500 LL (€ 0.29) to 3 000 LL (€ 1.72), so bundles have been created to reward loyal customers by offering all you can play daily offers at around 20 000 LL (€ 11.47), and monthly subscriptions at around 300 000 LL (€ 172) a month, as well as other various perks like Happy Hour rates.

The old generation of gamers still have their usual Network spots that they've been frequenting for up to a decade in some cases, meanwhile newer gaming lounges are successfully attracting the younger generation with well known game characters printed on shop windows, friendlier logos, and bolder colors. There's no large distinction or rivalry between the different types of spots. as Client bases overlap and Networks are open to people of all ages, and popular with age groups from teens looking to socialize and play new games, to university students that meet up with the same group of friends, to the veterans seeking a nostalgic retreat.

### Arcade Culture: Modern Gaming's Father Figure

Gaming earned its independence and built its cultural significance as it grew out of arcade culture in the early '80s. Arcade games weren't multi player ones but encouraged competitiveness by keeping track of the top scores. Players could save their high score under a three letter alias or nickname and the top score would be visible for all to see, serving also as a reference goal. Arcade gamers were not connected. High scores were not international. They were stored in each individual machine. Modern gaming is significantly more competitive because it allows international players to compete simultaneously. The wide open playing field is not a daunting deterrent, however. Even if a player is much less likely to win, it does not make it less fun for them to play the game. Competitiveness is even what attracts part of the demographic to gaming, such is the case of *Bkbk* – Joy Fadel, 29 year old owner of Blooming Events and an HR manager at an insurance company – a competitive

person who comes to gaming as a way to earn the recognition of friends and peers.

"Showcasing your skills" is another important aspect of the Network appeal. Bragging is part of gaming culture: "Gaming needs a special skillset, we're proud because we play difficult games. Not everyone can do what we do," Bkbk offered.

The first rule of gamer code of conduct seems to include respect and admiration towards another gamer's dedication and skills. A lot of games are incredibly competitive, so gamers start growing a certain ego when they reach a certain level. But then again, it's natural to feel pride in your achievements. Game developers often dedicate features to reward gamers for their loyalty and dedication, *Charb* called it "vanity in the virtual world": elite titles, rare weapons, etc... These rewards highlight specific achievements and make sure those successes are recognized by other gamers. In sociology, "Social Embeddedness" is a phenomenon which assumes that one's belonging to a particular social group impacts that individual's behavior, and not vice versa. The in game rewards previously mentioned create a hierarchy, thus bringing forth this "Social embeddedness," anchoring it in displays of social support and respect.

According to research, multi player gaming is typically built on a masculine kind of bonding: Building social and emotional ties based on sharing an activity, rather than on disclosing oneself in intimate conversation. When asked how one can belong to the gaming community and access this specific cultural bonding, Elie Keserwani (*Sainty*), a 35 year old librarian and gaming community builder, said that "the moment you start playing you already feel like you belong." Jose Nader (*Bloodfrey*), a 26 year old Graphic designer/ animator, on the other



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hand, said that you have to invest a lot of your time into playing to belong to the gaming community, and warned there was a fine line between hobby and addiction with gaming.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, you'll find that the gaming community is mostly inclusive and distinguished through its participatory culture above all else. Even though it's reputable for being a "boy's club," surveys show that more females have been getting into gaming over the years, especially since 2010. Today, the gender gap is almost null, female gamers making up around 40 % of all gamers (Romano). Even in Lebanon, there has been a rise in the number of female gamers, although they do not frequent the Networks as much. The reason for that is that it would "feel awkward to be the only girl there," as *TheQueen*, 23 year

she explained that she rarely comes across any prejudiced encounters, and that when it is the case, those ideas are immediately dismissed after a game, confirming that "gaming brings people together regardless of gender."

All gamers seem to lose themselves in front of their screens. They take shifts playing and being part of the audience, no matter which role they take, it's pure entertainment. Some players have a funny, easy going character, and naturally attract an audience, others are more rigid but make up for lack of showmanship with skill.

Networks provide not only a place for these interactions, but it turns this sense of belonging to something more tangible. Gamers build real connections in parallel to the fictional gaming ones.



old Graphic Design Student Jasmine Boustany explained. *T* – Tala Tlili, a 22 years old political science graduate

working for the International Youth Federation – would simply rather avoid the noisy and crowded atmosphere, often opting for the comfort of her own home. Locally, females are slowly incorporating themselves into a community, that is known to be predominantly male. A few obstacles stand in the way of them feeling completely at ease, the major issue: Not being taken seriously because not many girls are high ranking. Reinforcing the concept that the gaming community is mostly acceptant and inclusive, *TheQueen* expressed that, if a girl shows her worth in gaming skills, the usually rare misogynistic comments dissipate and turn into commendation. *T* concurs, "It is not a huge issue, but it is present,"

### The New View: Geeky is Cool and Actually Good for a Young Mind

Initially installed on home computers for educational reasons gaming software slowly but consistently gained more value and recognition as computers became more suitable for game enjoyment. 'Gamers' were only recognized as such in the mid to late 1980s when they started building their own discourse<sup>2</sup> (Kirkpatrick, 2015). Thanks to outlets such as gaming magazines, game reviews and a participatory culture where all gamers were encouraged to share their experience, a gamer's expertise came with a sense of earned belonging. But gamers had a tough time convincing everyone else about the healthiness

of their new hobby.

Encouraging kids to stay indoors instead of going outside and playing with others, computer games were quickly perceived as addictive and dangerous. Many argued that with the evolution of technology, the gap between the player and the character in the game shrunk, and the experience got more "real." Games became an even bigger threat when studies came out linking gaming to aggression, addiction and depression. The hazard label affixed onto this hobby only contributed to its popularity because it gave players an arguably paradoxical rebel status.<sup>3</sup>

Today, gaming is being embraced by academia. Several recent studies highlight the benefits. Research has indicated that, contrary to conventional beliefs, playing video games is not intellectually lazy and sedating, but promotes a wide range of cognitive and spatial skills, helps develop problem solving skills and enhances creativity.<sup>4</sup>

Being a gamer is an identity. A lifestyle with its own "capital." There are now even professional e sport gamers who 'play' for the US National Basketball Association (NBA). As social media and online gaming platforms allowed more connectivity among players, the gaming community became a subculture with its own history, vocabulary, knowledge, social structures, values, humor, and economy.<sup>5</sup>

In Lebanon, gaming is still widely seen as a useless hobby. That could be changing. In June 2017, Maroun Merhej took home over \$10.8 million in prize money from the 7<sup>th</sup> International Dota 2 tournament in Seattle, USA, the competition with the largest gaming award prize pool.

Merhej has since taken up gaming professionally, thus far earning over \$3 million in prize money. One thing is for sure, Lebanese parents were definitely baffled as they heard his gaming victory announcement on the news, and in time, the material rewards might just legitimize gaming in the eyes of Lebanese adults.

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# What's in a Videogame?

Ana Maria Luca



Ana Maria Luca is a Romanian award winning journalist currently working with the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and is a contributor to European feminist magazine News Mavens. Until 2016, she spent seven years and half based in Beirut covering regional politics for various regional, international and local media outlets. She studied Journalism at the University of Bucharest and holds an MA in International Affairs from the Lebanese American University in Beirut, where she specialized in radicalization and sectarian conflict. In 2004 she won the special prize of the jury for long feature in Freedom House "Young Journalists of the Year" competition and in 2007 she was awarded the second prize in "Writing for Central and Eastern Europe" for a feature on children left behind by migrant workers.

His name is Ahmad and he is a Hezbollah fighter in Syria.

He defends the holy Shiite shrine of *Sayydeh Zeinab* in Damascus, he infiltrates an ISIS camp in the vicinity of al Hujeira to save prisoners, he saves hostages held by ISIS in a house in Qusair, before the big battle sweeps the town. Ahmad also takes part in the battle of Qusair, then he catches the mastermind of a twin suicide bombing that killed 46 in November 2015 in Beirut's southern suburbs. He finally gets to be a sniper in an ambush against a Daesh brigade planning an attack on Ras Baalbek, in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, where Hezbollah fought in the summer of 2017.

But Ahmad also does strange things a soldier would never do. While on the front he doesn't think of his mother or his wife or children, he never misses his family. In between two missions, while waiting for his battle order that comes in an official note with the Hezbollah logo, he randomly scribbles on pieces of paper "We support you, Nasrallah!"

In February, Hezbollah launched its latest video game, a 3D first person shooter, Counterstrike sourced, that calls on players to defend Shiite shrines across Syria and Lebanon from hordes of ISIS fighters. It glorifies the Iran backed paramilitary group's involvement in the Syrian war starting 2013.

For the unaware gamer, not much is different from Counterstrike or Call of Duty. Even for the political scientist who followed Hezbollah's battles in Syria the game contains nothing new. But the devil is in the details.

Hezbollah officials vowed that the game is not a recruitment tool.

"It is a tool to confront the savage culture invading our market using games that are empty of feelings and belonging," the game official website reads. "A tribute to the souls

of martyrs and their families as well as the sacrifices of the wounded and their families," it adds.

But the truth is, however, that Hezbollah's video game is but another tiny piece of the Party of God's propaganda. It aims at teens and pre teens, in Lebanon but also Lebanese Shiite diaspora, who are mesmerized by the mirage of becoming a hero on the battle front. It's yet another tool meant to influence and shape young minds who now will ingest and internalize the idea that Sunnis are the enemy, just as generations were raised to think of Israel as the source of all evil.

## Videogames and Military Recruitment

Enticing military recruits by using videogames is nothing new. Hezbollah itself launched several. The first videogame, Quds Kid, was released in 2000. After the Israeli Defense Forces withdrew from Israel in 2000, another videogame, Special Force I, followed. The third one, Special Force II, was based on the 2006 war with Israel.

Even regular armed forces like the US Army flirted with the idea of using videogames for attracting more young recruits by exposing them to the "coolness of fighting". In mid 2010, an Army Experience Center that cost some \$12 million, a gaming and virtual reality complex that sought to introduce young people to the Army via violent video games, closed down. The center was located in Northeast Philadelphia's sprawling Franklin Mills Mall.

Inaugurated in 2008, the center has become a hangout area for teens and preteens who played Halo or Madden, or piloted Apache and Black Hawk helicopters on combat simulators. During the two years it functioned, the center increased the recruitment rate by 15 percent.

However, it was met with relentless protests from anti war activists and parents who accused the Army of luring children into enlisting by showing them the excitement of battle.

Videogames have also become part of the Islamic State's marketing machine. At the end of 2014, a new videogame forged within the caliphate emerged online. It was a modified version of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004). The ISIS production was called *Grand Theft Auto: Salil al Sawarem* (Sword Clash) and its rebel fighter main character attacks the police and the army clad in a black bandana, a loose black shirt, and camouflage trousers.

This might seem a joke to some gamers, but it just might be significant that ISIS militants are gamers and find inspiration in the productions, making them an effective recruiting tool.

'Jihadi John,' the man who decapitated James Foley with a knife on camera and produced a movie that horrified the world, was identified as Kuwait born and British educated Mohammad Emwazi. He was a keen video game player and a martial arts practitioner. In a chilling twist, in a school yearbook from when he was 10, Emwazi lists his favorite computer game as *Duke Nukem: Time To Kill* and his favorite book as *How To Kill A Monster*, from the popular children's Goosebumps series.

Baghdadi's caliphate welcomed and even used video games to attract more militants, cultivating and exploiting a coolness factor the same way the fashion industry does, replete with models and actors and high production value. "The Bulldozer," an ISIS executioner in Iraq, was very popular on jihadist websites due to his size and strength. The fact that he maimed children in public seemed not to affect his stardom.

During the war between the Islamic State and the Iran backed Shiite militias in Iraq, social

media drowned in gore videos of torture, executions, and even fighters mutilating bodies. They were not coming only from the Islamic State militants, but also from the Shiite militiamen let loose to torture or behead Sunnis on camera, on occasion even shooting children accused of being "ISIS supporters."

Hezbollah, however, is another matter. It did not forge its propaganda on the battlefield, but in very well equipped studios that hire well educated Lebanese Shiites taught to blindly believe in the party line. For Hezbollah releasing a new videogame to praise its heroes is not for immediate purposes like in the case of the Islamic State. For the Party of God it is but a very small party of a better organized, long term strategy to shape a Shiite society under its rule.

## Building Hezbollah's Utopia

Hezbollah has the Imam al Mahdi Scouts just like the Soviet Union had the pioneers and the Komsomol. The Shiite Islamic fundamentalism guiding Hezbollah and communism might be light years apart, but the methods of implementing their ideas are quite similar. The Soviet Communist Party wanted new generations of young people who swore blind allegiance to the communist state and who would never question the state.

Hezbollah wants its youth to scribble Hassan Nasrallah's name on pieces of paper as they're waiting for new orders on the front, instead of thinking of the girl they have a crush on. Just like Ahmad, the character in the videogame.

Since 1983, with help from Iran, the Party of God has raised generations and generations of children and trained them to become soldiers ready to fight Israel when the party calls.

If Hezbollah's is listed as a terrorist



organization by the US, Israel and some other countries, in Lebanon it has grown into one of the largest and strongest political parties that dominates the government together with its political allies, the Free Patriotic Movement and Amal Movement.

Using its military and security apparatus to keep outsiders away from its controlled areas, Hezbollah established itself as a state within a state, with its own welfare and social care system tied to political and military allegiance. It also has its own telecommunications network that works when the national operators are scrambled.

But most importantly, it built its own education system, the Imam al Mahdi schools and established the Imam al Mahdi Scouts organization, where children and teens from 4 to 17 would learn about religion, gender roles in society. But they are also told that there is no higher aspiration in life than sacrificing themselves on the frontlines for Hezbollah's cause, the fight against Israel.

At Ashura rallies organized by Hezbollah in the regions it controls, children carry flags and chant "Death to Israel", many times wearing military fatigues.

Sometimes, teens die on the front too.

In April 2015, Mashhur Fahd Shamseddine died doing "his jihadist duty." Al-Manar aired his picture, the picture of a teen aged 14 or 15, saying that "Hezbollah bid farewell to the mujahid martyr." Al Araby al Jadeed reported at the time that the teenager was killed in an Israeli raid on Hezbollah positions in the Qalamoun area.

Shamseddine was not the only teen killed as Hezbollah was fighting on the Syrian front. A newly built Mausoleum for Syrian in the Southern Suburbs of Beirut houses some 200 graves. Hezbollah has never disclosed how many fighters it lost on the fronts in Syria, but estimations go as far as 1,200. Many were young men from Shiite village who left behind families who now say they are proud of their sacrifice and who get allowances and other perks from the Party of God.

Getting into Hezbollah's military ranks was not easy before the group got involved in the Syrian war. Children get recruited and start training at very young ages—typically at around 10 to 13 years old, when they join the Imam al Mahdi Scouts. Later, when the scouts are 16 or 17, they can join the party's military ranks or opt to continue their education.

The Imam al Mahdi Scouts were founded in

1985 and are registered with the Lebanese Ministry of Education. The organization includes children from four to 17 years of age, split into Cubs, Scouts and Rangers. Besides outdoor activities and charity work, the Imam al Mahdi Scouts also teach the young to be good Muslims, to volunteer at local mosques, and to defend Lebanon against Israel.

In a monthly Mahdi magazine from January 2018 for children between 8 and 12, Hezbollah published a naïve drawing of a child standing on top of a tank holding the Hezbollah flag in Qana, Southern Lebanon to mark the anniversary of the attack in 1986.

Moreover, the magazine dedicated to children between 13 and 17 features, among scientific and religious articles, pictures and stories of young fighters who died doing their "jihadist duty".

The comics are mostly war stories about Hezbollah fighters battling Israeli forces. Practically all role models for boys are war heroes who lost their lives or sacrificed limbs and friends fighting for the Islamic Resistance.

It's with stories like this that teenagers in the best schools in Dahieh and South Lebanon are enticed to join Hezbollah's military ranks. Children attending the best schools in the southern suburbs of Beirut frequently go on trips to Hezbollah museums and camps. They watch presentations about weaponry and are told stories of heroes of the Resistance and how they lived in tunnels to defend Lebanon of the Israeli occupation.

## Shaping a New Narrative to Justify the War against Sunnis in Syria

Going from the Islamic Resistance that fights against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon to the Shiite militia fighting against fellow Muslims in Syria and sending people to Iraq to train other Iran Backed Shiite militia was a hard switch for Hezbollah.

The Party of God did not even admit that it had fighters on the Syrian front for the most part of 2011 and 2012. However, Shiites in villages in South Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley reported secret burials.

But in October 2012, the death of a high ranking commander who had played an important role in the 2006 war against Israel revealed more than the party officials wanted to. Abu Abbas' death could not be ignored and, after paving the village and lining it with yellow flags, even Sheikh Mohammad Yazbeck went to the village next to Baalbek to hold the sermon in his honor.

It was about the time Hezbollah started mentioning *taqfir*, intolerant Muslims accusing other Muslims of apostasy, in relation with Islamist movements in Syria and also rising Salafist discourse in Lebanon, mostly in support of the Syrian uprising.

But it was not enough for people to validate the group's involvement in the Syrian war. The conflict has no relations to Hezbollah's fight against Israel constructed around the idea of defending South Lebanon of military aggression and occupation.

Hezbollah's line was that the war in Syria was about Sunni extremists rebelling against a political regime that had backed Hezbollah, ensuring it a free highway to Iran and fostering



# We're Virtually There: Ethics and Digital Technology in the Coming Years

Rami el Ali

some military bases on Syrian territory. But still, it was no life and death matter to justify a full military involvement.

With some fighters losing their lives in Syria and buried at home, people were already starting to ask questions that Hezbollah was not yet ready to answer. At first Hassan Nasrallah vowed that Hezbollah, as an organization, was not involved in Syria. Then he explained that Lebanese Shiites from villages in the Bekaa Valley, who also happened to be Hezbollah fighters, had crossed the border to defend villages from Syrian rebel brigades.

Soon enough the narrative of defending Shiite shrines and Shiite villages in Syria from *taqfir*s merged with the anti Israeli narrative: the emergence of Daesh, Nusra Front and other Salafist brigades was blamed on Israeli interference and sponsorship. Suddenly, in Hezbollah's world, the Sunni rebels in Syrian were Israel's minions trying to wipe out any Shiite influence in the Middle East, therefore also in Lebanon.

Whether this was an intended outcome or it was just chance, this wouldn't have worked without the strong foundations of educating generations and generation not only to see Israel as the source of all evil, but also to obey the party without question. If the party says Israel is behind the Syrian uprising, the party is always right.

Meanwhile, Syrian refugees were pouring into Lebanon, Sunni Salafist sheikhs in Tripoli and Sidon gained popularity by speaking against Hezbollah's alliance with the government in Damascus capitalizing on the divisions among the moderate political leadership in the Sunni community and Saad Hariri's exile.

The fear and anger between common Sunnis and Shiites started to transcend the political sphere. While covering the fighting between the Sunni fighters in Bab el Tabbeneh and Alawites in Jabal Mohsen, I went to Tripoli to speak to community leader. The driver of the cab that took me to Bab el Tabbaneh happened to be a young Shiite from the southern suburbs of Beirut. He did not disclose his religious background until he sighed with relief on the way back to Beirut. In the 7 hours we spent in Tripoli, he had never left the car for fear that someone might realize he was Shiite and might attack him.

Hezbollah's presence in Syria triggered a deterioration in security in Lebanon in 2013, with Hezbollah controlled neighborhoods becoming targets for suicide bombers.

While Hezbollah's people were fighting in Qusair and training Shiite militias in Iraq and Yemen, civilians died in Lebanese areas inhabited by Shiite civilians. In November 2015, 47 people were killed in a twin suicide bombing in Bourj al Barajneh, the deadliest blast since the civil war.

Between 2012 and 2016, over 38 explosions shook Lebanon leaving over 200 people dead. Many of them were deemed martyrs, but they were, in fact, just victims. But in the Party of God's narrative there was never any room for showing suffering, despair, pain, fear of death or defeat. Hezbollah's heroes are always victorious, glory and dignity can only be found by defeating an enemy in war. It's all about the holy defense.

For them, Hezbollah will never release a videogame. Only soldiers are worthy of being remembered. For now with a videogame and 200 graves in a mausoleum.

Video Games have become a lucrative business, a smart career choice, and a form of art. But for many, it remains hard to shake off an early impression of the technology. Video games are at best entertainment, and at worst a menace, so the thought went in the '70's. In the '80s, children were warned that video games were an idle indulgence, and many young people at the time just did not find them "cool." Things changed in the '90's when Sony's PlayStation gained the attention of many previously dismissive consumers. The decades that followed have seen a steady rise in the popularity of video games among consumers, businesses, and academics. Today video games are so well entrenched in culture (just think about Minecraft or Roblox) that it is hard to recall their rough beginnings. Despite these changes, it is not clear that the original objection to video games that they are a waste of time, a menace, or an indulgence has been altogether disarmed. Constrained to the digital screen and mostly occurring in fictional contexts, video games remain a diversion, even if a particularly successful one.

I think that in the coming years, this original impression will undergo a massive upheaval. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we will see that video games, far from being a mere diversion, were the seeds and training grounds for something much bigger. Their initially circumscribed reality will expand up to the point of engulfing almost every domain of human life. Not because everything will become a game, but because the virtual worlds and acts that have largely been constrained to video games will become the worlds and acts of everyday life. It is an open question whether society at large will be ready for this upheaval. Much of this turns on taking the issue seriously enough, and part of my aim here is to convince you that this should

be taken seriously. Only in this way can we begin raising social awareness, implementing appropriate legislation, and thinking about the many dangers and opportunities the future will provide.

A good starting point for thinking about our digital future is a recent philosophical puzzle. In 2009, Morgan Luck presented a dilemma for video game enthusiasts, "the gamer's dilemma." Luck pointed out that in video games involving a single human player, gamers regularly commit acts of virtual murder acts which would have been considered murder had they been performed in a real rather than a virtual environment and take these to be morally permissible. Plausibly, this is because unlike actual murder, no one is harmed in performing such virtual acts. Their only "victims" are characters controlled by artificial intelligence (AI), and those are not subject to moral consideration. What Luck points out is that this justification that there are no victims equally applies to virtual acts we are less inclined to accept. Specifically, consider a hypothetical videogame that allowed virtual child molestation. Like virtual murder, virtual child molestation is victimless. But unlike virtual murder, we are not inclined to think the act morally permissible. Intuitively, the gamer performing virtual killings is not doing something wrong, but the gamer performing virtual child molestation is. Hence the dilemma: if there are no morally relevant differences in performing virtual murder and virtual child molestation, then on pain of inconsistency, gamers must either reject acts of virtual murder as morally impermissible, or accept acts of virtual child molestation as morally permissible. Neither is a happy outcome.

Whatever one thinks of the argument or its conclusion, one thing that should catch our



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attention is the dilemma's focus on the moral evaluation of *virtual* rather than "real" acts. What are virtual acts? Consider a particular virtual act, say virtually jumping. To perform a virtual jump, I (the player) press a button on my game controller. By doing this, I cause my in game avatar to jump. My avatar performs an act of jumping in its world, and I perform an act of button pressing in mine. Where is the virtual jump? The virtual jump, and more generally, the virtual act, is an act that bridges these two contexts. I perform a virtual jump when, in the "real" world, I act in such a way as to make my in game avatar jump in their world.

It is hard to motivate interest in the gamer's dilemma, and take seriously the idea of virtual acts having moral status, if video games are just a way of passing time. The focus of the dilemma seems at best marginal in the moral world. But this impression couldn't be more mistaken. Virtual acts are a new type of act, and a type of act that we should expect to see more and more of in the near future. To see why, let's turn to a brief picture of our technological present.

One of the new emerging technologies expected to have a widespread impact on everyday human life is *virtual reality technology*. Early forms of this technology have started becoming available to consumers in devices like the Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, PlayStation VR, Oculus Go, and Google Daydream. Upon using a device, users experience a virtual reality (henceforth, VR). It is not easy to describe VR without first hand experience, but two images help. One is that VR is like entering a TV. If you found yourself inside a TV show, seeing, hearing, and interacting with its world, this would be something like the experience of VR. Another image comes from the long running series, *Dr. Who*. Dr. Who uses a narrow, phonebooth shaped, spaceship. On entering the booth, visitors are typically surprised at the spacious surroundings, leading them to exclaim, "It's bigger on the inside!" Something similarly surprising is true of VR. Current devices occupy a small corner of a room. Users wear a headset that looks as restrictive as blindfolds, and heavier. But rather than resulting in a claustrophobic experience, the person in VR experiences herself as being in virtual spaces that can far exceed the physical dimensions of the surrounding room. In a small room, one can experience being in a jungle at sunset, with sun and cloudy skies on the distant horizon. This virtual space is perceptible, manipulatable, and indefinitely expansive, all while fitting into a limited physical space. Moreover, it is a space that can be private to its user, it can be occupied alone, or with AI powered substitutes in place

of others.

Nor is VR technology constrained to the world inside the headset, a purely virtual world separate from the "real" world. With head mounted *augmented reality* devices, which we should expect to see in the coming five years, virtual items can be superimposed on our real surroundings (for some good demonstrations, see Leap Motion's YouTube channel). At this technology's limit, augmented reality glasses or even lenses can allow users to see two cups side by side — one 'real', the other virtual without being able to tell the difference. Maybe touching the cup will help, but this is not guaranteed. Today there are active research programs focused on extending movement, touch, and smell to VR, because everyone wants to feel more of these new virtual worlds. These projects are not only seeking to bring the "real" world into the virtual world, but also taking the virtual world out into the "real" world (of the latter, a good example is the Nintendo Labo).

The possibilities for using VR are vast, and alarming. Recently, news reports have projected that VR technology will be increasingly central to medicine, governance, business, military, education, sports, architecture, design, art, robotics, pornography, psychology, philosophy, and entertainment, amongst others.<sup>1</sup> A recent article titled, "Virtual Reality Experts Warn of Oncoming 'Moral Panic'" warns that along with its many uses, VR will bring diverse risks, including new forms of sexual infidelity, psychological depersonalization, manipulation, and torture.<sup>2</sup>

The projected social impact of virtual reality should reframe the significance of thinking about virtual acts. It may be easy to dismiss virtual acts when they are only animation on a screen. But as the dilemma shows, this is not always the case. And if we add to this that the act is now performed in a virtual context, when the virtual context surrounds you, and is of significance, it will be even less clear that being "merely virtual" matters. I may have only pressed a button, but a button press can lead to a lot, like the launch of a real missile. Is it "only virtual" if walking down the street you are startled by an AI controlled character, shaped like a human, falling to its virtual death on the "real" street? Presumably the urgency of shielding your child's eyes in this situation would exceed the urgency felt when viewing a similar image on a TV screen. Will you really have to do that? Maybe. Virtual and augmented reality will provide many new ways of doing things, and many of these are going to become as indispensable as the functions of a smartphone or the internet. Most probably, the headset will contain your phone,

and be your primary access to the internet. In the near future, you may not want your child to leave the house without their headset.

Of course in one way this is nothing new. We live in a public world, where other people's actions can intrude on our private worlds. We sometimes hear the neighbors, even at home. Now we might also catch glimpses of their virtual worlds, and the virtual acts they perform. But note the difference: ordinary acts have a circumscribed moral, social, and legal status. Virtual acts, by contrast, are on much murkier grounds because of how different they can be from "real world" acts. Virtual items are not constrained by real world physics in the way normal items are, and the same is true of virtual acts. What should our stance be towards

someone embodying a human skeleton for an avatar in public? Or what should we think of a neighbor who keeps a virtual harem at home? Should we allow VR for children's education? Will it be okay to make them witness virtually reconstructed scenarios from say, WWII or the war in Syria, to get a better sense of why we should avoid violence? What about religious education that involves witnessing virtually reconstructed scenes from the holy books?

The point is not to raise alarm. The point is that if we begin by thinking about virtual acts and their significance today, we may be in a position to reap the benefits and avoid the pitfalls of a new world. It's easy to let fear obscure the incredible achievements that will be possible with VR. Anyone who has watched



educational tutorials in VR, or witnessed first hand the possible emotional and empathic impact of VR art, will have a sense of how much more this technology enables. I have observed hypothetical four dimensional objects, been to the moon and back with Apollo 11, admired different parts of Nefertari's tomb, and embodied a black sanitation worker in the 1968 worker's strike preceding the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., all in VR. But like any impactful tool, everything turns on handling it the right way. Just as VR can provide widespread, hands on education to millions for free, it can also create an inequality gap where the richest and the poorest can literally occupy different worlds.

Today, in the Middle East, we have had minimal interaction with VR. There is little public awareness of the technology's presence, and no Arabic VR content to speak of. And this should be surprising, on many different levels. First, there are many social issues here that could benefit from VR's capacity to produce empathic experiences. For instance, women are wronged on a regular basis, and just one VR film captured from a woman's perspective as she walks down an Egyptian, Saudi, or Lebanese street can go a long way towards showing what exactly is so problematic in the way men here comport themselves. Similarly, a single VR film that showed you the insides of a Christian and a Muslim household in Lebanon would do much to undermine the imagined differences produced by the sectarian system. And finally, a well made VR experience of the Israeli Palestinian border would do much to reveal the facts as they are, whatever they are.

Second, there is much content that only we are in a position to produce. Consider the long heritage of Arabic poetry, food, calligraphy or Islamic architecture. Any of these can be

rendered in the first person perspective using VR. And each would not only help the person here connect to and better understand times past in this region, but also help those outside understand where we are coming from. In some cases, these might also be a way of preserving what will otherwise be lost, and much is being lost, for instance, in Syria and Yemen.

Third, there are many challenges Arabs face along with everyone else on earth. Today the whole planet is in danger because of global warming, poor recycling practices, and obsessive consumerism. Many people in the region remain unaware of how pressing these issues are. And it's no wonder. The majority of online content is not in Arabic, and the majority of Arabic content, like all internet content, is not focused. How beneficial would it be to witness first hand the current destruction of our planet, and be shown first hand the small actions we can take to alleviate this?

Let's end with one last analogy. Most, if not all of us, know that we can change the background wallpaper on a personal computer. But imagine we didn't. Until now, humanity has been in this position. The material world around us has been assumed to be the default and only condition for human society. Right now we are on the verge of discovering that the background world can be anything we like, provided we can imagine it, and code it. Playing games in virtual contexts was a first step, but the journey has only just begun. And because the value of things depends on us, which designs we keep and cast off is also determined by us.

1 A helpful place to start is <https://www.vrs.org.uk/virtual-reality-applications/> but google will also present plenty of search results.  
2 See <https://www.techworld.com/apps-wearables/virtual-reality-experts-warn-of-oncoming-moral-panic-3659331/>

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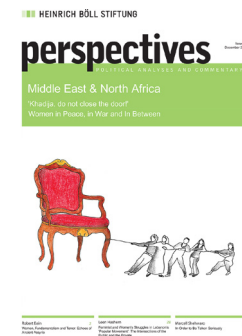
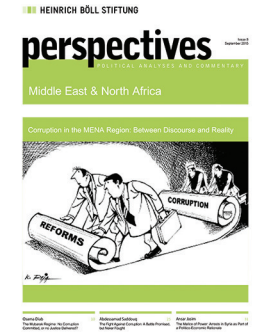
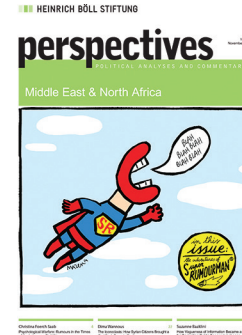
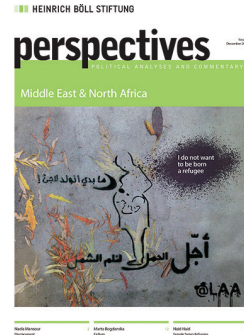
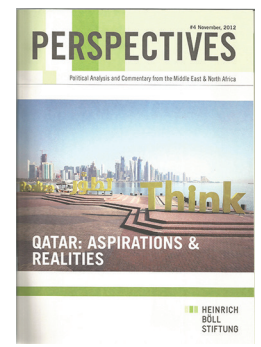
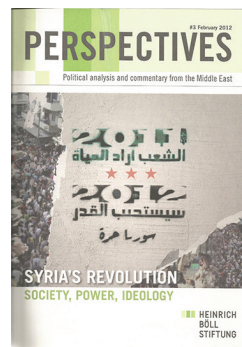
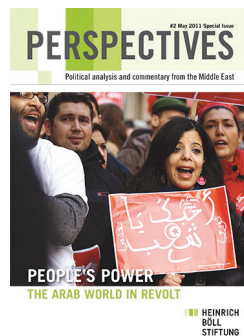
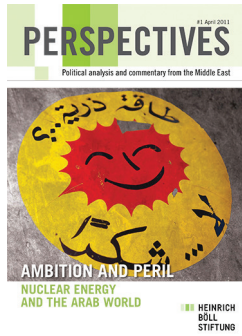
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