

I. O YOUTH, O ARABS, O NATIONALISTS

Recalling the High Tides of Anticolonial Pan-Arabism

Pick a pen and take note: the Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca, the Christians to the Vatican and the national liberation movements to Algiers!

—AMILCAR CABRAL

We will never repeat the past. . . . We will get rid of the past by regaining our rights in the Suez Canal. . . . O citizens—when we build the high dam we also build the dam of honor, freedom, and dignity, and we get rid of the dams of degradation and humiliation and declare all of Egypt one front. . . . All of Egypt will fight until its last drop of blood.

—GAMAL ABDEL NASSER, SPEECH ON THE FOURTH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE REVOLUTION IN ALEXANDRIA

Prelude

Revisiting *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, a little bit more than two decades after its publication, Albert Hourani made a series of observations on the problem-space the book inhabited, as well as on the alternative directions the project could take, or maybe should have taken. These retrospective historiographical comments, included in the preface to the 1983 edition, fall into two overlapping sets of concerns. First, Hourani draws his readers' attentions to the insufficiency of a "pure" history of ideas and to the need to supplement it "by asking how and why the ideas of my writers had an influence on the minds of others."¹ The histories of ideas and arguments, Hourani suggested, would benefit from an anchoring in social history, an attentiveness to a finer scale of analysis that pays attention to intra-Arab distinctions, and an examination of the processes of mediation of thought via such vectors as poetry, which disseminate it to wider publics.²

In the second series of comments, Hourani recalled a guiding assumption of the project: focusing on breaks and discontinuities with the past. "To some extent," he wrote twenty years later, "I may have distorted the thought of the writers I studied, at least those of the first and second generations: the 'modern'

element in their thought may have been smaller than I implied, and it would have been possible to write about them in a way which emphasized continuity rather than a break with the past.”³ Hourani’s late interest in the question of historical continuity went beyond his retrospective worry regarding the emphasis placed on reading more “echoes of European thought” (discontinuity) than “echoes of Islamic political thought” (continuity) in the works of Arab thinkers he dealt with, as he put it a few years later in a rich autobiographical interview.⁴ It took the form of a call to write about other kinds of writers. Those were the ones not given their due in the book. In the process Hourani alerted his readers to how the historian’s present is refracted through the formation of historical objects, and how they are interpreted by making explicit the decisions he made in the early 1960s regarding who to include in his pantheon of Arab thought. “Those,” as he put it, “who still lived in their inherited world of thought, whose main aim was to preserve the continuity of its tradition, and who did so in accustomed ways, writing and teaching within the framework of the great schools, the Azhar in Cairo or the Zaytuna in Tunis, or of the Sufi brotherhoods,” were the authors who had remained dominant throughout the nineteenth century.⁵ “In the present century they have lost much of their domination,” noted the veteran historian, “or so it seemed at the point in time when I was writing my book.” Hourani’s “or so it seemed” gives his readers a clue to how his emerging interest in the question of continuity registers the transformations altering the political landscape in the Arab world in the two decades since he first published his book. “It is clearer now than it was then, at least to me,” Hourani wrote, “that the extension of the area of political consciousness and activity, the coming of ‘mass politics,’ would bring into the political processes men and women who were still liable to be swayed by what the Azhar said or wrote, and what the shaykhs of a brotherhood might teach.”⁶

Revisiting futures past in 1983, with an emphasis on continuity rather than its opposite, Hourani subtly revised some of the conclusions of his book’s epilogue, “Between Past and Future,” which addressed the post–World War II era from the vantage point of the early 1960s. There, the picture drawn was of the passing of a world divided into East and West, and the birth of a new modern world. The West had managed to carry out “its historic mission of creating a new and unified world.”⁷ “The world was one,” Hourani concluded, during the age of independence and national liberation. Not only was it unified on the levels of material techniques and science but, more importantly for our purposes, “politically too the world had become one: there was a single universe of political discourse. There were of course different political systems, but the differences could not be explained simply in terms of regional or national

character or tradition.”⁸ Differences, during the age of ideologies, were no longer predicated on the *particularities* of region, nation, or tradition. Rather, the differences were themselves contained within a single *universal* terrain of political discourse. “The most important of all changes which came to the surface in these twenty years,” Hourani added in his depiction of the postwar era, “was this: the past was abolished whether it were the past of ‘westernization’ or the more distant past of the traditional societies.”⁹ The pasts of tradition, and westernization, seemed then to have passed for good to usher in a universal modernity at the pinnacle of anticolonial passions a decade after the coming to power of the Free Officers in Egypt (1952) and in the last hours of the Algerian struggle for national liberation. This was the time that preceded the Islamic revival and the Iranian Revolution. The promise of anticolonial nationalism had not yet been “followed by the crisis of the third-world-state, and the culture was became identified with chauvinism, ethnic hatred, and cynically manipulative and corrupt regimes.”¹⁰

The militant intellectuals that will take part in founding the Lebanese New Left in the mid-1960s were swept off their feet at a very young age by the tidal waves of Arab nationalisms and their promise of a united popular sovereignty on Arab lands after defeating colonialism, which had divided the Arab people into different state cantons. They grew up in that post-World War II age when the world, as Hourani observed in the early 1960s, had become one. The political, articulated ideologically, mainly between different nationalisms (say, Lebanese, Syrian, and Arab), appeared to have gained a greater autonomy from the social fabrics and cultural lifeworlds that previously articulated differences—what Hourani refers to as region, national character, and tradition. The postwar world that Hourani is describing is a time of modernity that, by abolishing the past of “westernization” and seemingly separating the political from the social and the cultural, especially in the form of Arab nationalism, acquires a higher degree of universality and renders political differences abstract and *commensurable*.

In what follows, I stitch together the biographical, political, and intellectual in a coming of age narrative that underscores the early pivotal events, particularly the high tides of Arab nationalism that marked these young soon to be militant intellectuals, and their own reconstructions of their distant pasts, before they founded the Lebanese New Left and became known as the 1960s generation.¹¹ “Recalling,” in the chapter’s title, is both an act of remembrance and a retrospective critical practice, as in requesting the return of a product already in use after the discovery of a manufacturing defect.¹² The products they are recalling are Arab nationalism and its promises of sovereignty and the

modern, single ideological universe of political discourse they inhabited and that contributed so much to fashioning them into political subjects operating outside the boundaries of their own sectarian, regional, and kin communities.

This first chapter is also a “prehistory” of the New Left militant intellectuals who will for the most part found or join Socialist Lebanon (1964–70). I am using “prehistory” in four overlapping ways. First, it stands for the period that predates the time of their Marxist political engagement in underground political cells associated with practices of secrecy and anonymous publishing. Second, it also refers to the time before their deep immersion in Marxist theory: reading it, translating it, and producing it. I therefore mostly rely on their own reconstructions of their pasts in the interviews I conducted with them and in their memoirs to get a sense of the questions, hopes, and desires animating them there and then. Third, I use “prehistory” to refer to the times before the comrades’ imaginations were captured by the movement of history whose milestones included such events as the Chinese, Cuban, and Vietnamese Revolutions. Finally, having been born in the first years of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), a time when the Ba’th had already been in power in Syria and Iraq for more than a decade, I was not fully aware before I began conducting these interviews of the importance of Arab nationalism, and especially Ba’thist ideology and politics, to those militant intellectuals (such as Mahmoud Soueid, Abbas Beydoun, Azza Charara Beydoun, Fawwaz Traboulsi, Ahmad Beydoun, Waddah Charara, and Muhsin Ibrahim, among others) who would later form the backbone of the Lebanese New Left. The matter is not merely an empirical historical “lacuna” on my part. It is more than that. Having been born into times of “Really Existing Ba’thism,” particularly in its Assadist incarnation, Arab nationalist politics and ideology was synonymous, from my own generational perspective, with authoritarian regimes and apparatuses of power masquerading as visions of national sovereignty against colonialism. For instance, revisiting the writings of Michel Aflaq, one of the founders and the ideologue of the Ba’th in and for our present, was never a question for me. The virulent debates between different strains of Arab nationalists—say, Nasserists and Ba’thists—were, as far as I was concerned, arcane historical materials. Despite their temporal proximity, they seemed light-years away from my own existential generational standpoint. They were a past past. On the other hand, coming of political age in the 1990s, after the interruption of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) and in the wake of the hopes, projects, and mostly defeats of this generation of leftists, their past experiences, past projects, past hopes, and multiple political and intellectual transformations seemed alive and worthy of revisiting—enough at least to propel me to undertake this project.

Two caveats before I start narrating: writing about a generation of Lebanese leftist militant intellectuals coming of age in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba and the rise of Abdel Nasser as the icon of Arab national liberation in the late 1950s requires taking stock of the particularities of Lebanese society's history and politics, namely, the shifting *articulations* of infranational familial, regional, and sectarian grounds with specific modern ideologies (Arab nationalism, communism, Lebanese nationalism) and supranational imaginaries and ties (Shi'i ties to Najaf, Maronites to Rome and France, for example). A word of caution is due here. In alluding to the articulation of infranational attachments, and supranational ones with modern ideologies such as Marxism, I could be misunderstood as going back to an older Orientalist literature on the area, which marginalized the importance of modern ideologies at work to explain all phenomena through the lens of an immutable Islamic civilizational whole. In an essay published in *Commentary* in January 1976, the British American historian Bernard Lewis wrote:

For to admit that an entire civilization can have religion as its primary loyalty is too much. Even to suggest such a thing is regarded as offensive by liberal opinion, always ready to take protective umbrage on behalf of those whom it regards as its wards. This is reflected in the present inability, political, journalistic and scholarly alike, to recognize the importance of the factor of religion in the current affairs of the Muslim world and in the consequent recourse to the language of left-wing and right-wing, progressive and conservative, and the rest of the Western terminology, the use of which in explaining Muslim political phenomena is about as accurate and as enlightening as an account of a cricket match by a baseball correspondent.¹³

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), in which this paragraph was cited, and the ensuing moment of postcolonial critique, has debunked the essentialist, ahistorical claims, on which such pronouncements on the Arab and Muslim world claiming its "exceptional" status are founded. In pointing to the peculiar *sociological* profile of these intellectuals and militants, such as the predominance of Shi'is among the ranks of the Lebanese Communist Party in the 1970s, or of Shi'i Beirut residents who hail from Lebanon's peripheries among the militant intellectuals of Socialist Lebanon in the mid-1960s, I do not highlight an ahistorical notion of religion, seeing in it the ultimate grid of explanation of an "exceptional" Arab politics.¹⁴ Having said that, I also do not seek to erase the particular sociological profiles of these militants, which includes more than just an upbringing in a particular sectarian community, to

engage in an “abstract” examination of theories and ideologies that does not account for the milieus in which these ideas found anchorage in particular times and places. Rather than isolating supposedly opposed first principles, “traditional” religious loyalty for the “Orientals” versus “modern” political ideologies for the “West,” and either assert the distinction to prove the backwardness of the “Oriental” or negate it to assert the modernity of the non-Westerners and undo the “exception,” it is more analytically fruitful, I think, to investigate how at different times and places, both in the West and in the non-West, different sociological distinctions and attachments based on, say, religion, region, family, gender, class, and race resonate and articulate with different political ideologies.

Second, after they disengaged from organized political activity, the intellectual militants who form the backbone of this project became distinguished social scientists, historians, and artists. There is no escape from engaging with their work, not only as the main body of material for this project but also to gain a thorough understanding of Lebanese history and its contemporary politics. As a result, in this chapter, and the rest of the work, I will follow Brinkley Messick’s lead in using their texts *both* as “sources for analysis and objects of analysis.”¹⁵ There is no external detached body of texts that acts as a ground and is relied on to build a context in which these texts were intervening. I use these authors’ oeuvre both to delineate the contours of a problem-space and to examine the interventions their texts were performing in a specific conjuncture.

Lebanon’s Nations and Its One State

On September 1, 1920, French general Henri Gouraud proclaimed the state of Greater Lebanon, with Elias al-Huwayyik, the Maronite patriarch, standing to his right.¹⁶ The new state was carved out by the French general, assuming the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon after defeating King Faysal’s Arab forces and occupying Damascus, from territories formerly belonging to the Ottoman provinces of Syria and Beirut, which were annexed to the semiautonomous Mount Lebanon *Mutasarrifiyya* (provincial government). The new state, encompassing Sunni, Shi’i, and Druze religious communities, eleven Christian ones, and a Jewish minority, was put together by the French around its long-term allies, the Maronite Christians, and *for them*.¹⁷ The new arrangement was imposed on the land’s Muslim communities, who had been torn away from the Syrian Arab hinterland, turning them “overnight from a millennium-old ruling majority into a ‘minority.’ They had become subject not only to the French themselves but to France’s client, the Maronites.”¹⁸

A weakened France, in the aftermath of its defeat during World War II, coupled with the Muslim elites' increasing adherence to the new state, produced a majority calling in 1943 for Lebanon's independence from the ailing imperial power. The fruit of this convergence was the National Pact, an unwritten agreement that founded independent Lebanon on a double negative: neither integration into Syria (the Muslims' Arab unionist demand) nor French protection (the Christians' demand). The double negation founding the nation defined Lebanon as a country "with an Arab face."¹⁹ The new country would become part of the Arab world, taking part in the founding of the Arab League. It would also relinquish the West's protection, but not sever its ties with it, while pledging to become neither a sanctuary nor a passageway for colonialism, in the famous expression of Riad al-Sulh, Lebanon's preeminent Sunni leader and prime minister at the time. Lebanon, founded on a compromise between different infranational sectarian communities and their supranational (Arab and Western) imaginaries and loyalties, would continually fail to produce a hegemonic unifying narrative for what it means to be a Lebanese national.

Lebanon was, since its inception, and still is, a house of many mansions.²⁰ Not all of these mansions, though, would have equal stature in steering the Lebanese state, gaining access to resources, and articulating their vision of the nation. The division of political power since the country's first constitution, which was drafted in 1926 under French Mandate rule, would be allocated according to a system of *provisional* confessional representation. This system of inscribing religious identities as political ones was not entirely new. Mount Lebanon had witnessed different power-sharing agreements between the Maronite and Druze communities in 1845 and 1861, which were imposed by the European powers, "protectors" of Ottoman minorities, to quell sectarian tensions between the two groups. In a political game that was structured by quotas for the different constitutive religious communities of the nation, demographics are key.²¹ The 1932 census was the last official census conducted in Lebanon. The 1990 amendments to the constitution, in the wake of the fifteen-year-long civil and regional wars, rectified the previous power imbalance by transferring some of the previous quasi-monarchic executive prerogatives of the Maronite president to the council of ministers and dividing parliamentary seats equally between Christians and Muslims. The country's open secret for a while now has been the retreat in the demographics of Christian inhabitants and the increase of its Muslim population, which forestalls conducting a new official census. The dangerous politics of sectarian population demographics is at the heart of Lebanese internal politics and its imbrications with regional and international ones.²²

From the particularities of the infranational religious communities and the system of political representation that tied participation in the institutional political game to confessional denominations sprang the precarious Lebanese Republic. The division of the state institutions and resources between competing confessional blocs spared the Lebanese polity from the military coups and the grip of authoritarian rule that shook the neighboring countries in the wake of the 1948 Arab catastrophe. The Lebanese state, torn as it was, and still is, between the different constituencies that compose it and fight over it, did not manage to “rise above” these loyalties, or to articulate itself fully with one of the groups to subdue the others. The Maronite elite, in control of most key positions in the Lebanese state on the eve of independence, put forth a politically and economically (*laissez-faire*) pro-Western Lebanese nationalism that saw itself as part of the “free world.”²³ Political movements and ideological currents would, when passing through the Lebanese prism, be predominantly refracted along the lines of the multiple components of the Lebanese polity, and be translated into the political game of sectarian balance. Anticolonial Arab nationalism, in its heyday, was therefore “perceived by some as a threat to the communitarian equilibrium, and by others as an instrument of mobilization against Maronite preeminence. Following from that, Arab nationalism’s progress or its retreat became an *internal stake*, with civil war at its horizon.”²⁴ As the late Samir Kassir, a sharp analyst of Lebanese history and politics, put it, “while in Syria, Jordan, or Iraq, the regional polarization had for effect to oppose the governments against society’s vibrant forces, rather against the entire society, in Lebanon, it [regional polarization] came to be inscribed at the heart of society.”²⁵ These modern ideological movements, such as Arab nationalism, Syrian nationalism, and communism, were *also* a means to oppose a politics centered around urban notables and rural feudal lords. Lebanon’s French birth out of Ottoman ruins catering for an Eastern Christian community against the unionist wishes of its Muslim “national partners,” the founding of a political system that divided the state along unequal confessional lines, and the failure to formulate a hegemonic vision of the nation resulted in the country’s extreme susceptibility to regional and international developments.

The Palestinian Nakba and the Lebanese South

“If you go to ‘Aitarun, you see Palestine . . . Israel, if you go to Marun al-Ras, you see the Hula Plains; and if you go to Rmaysh, you see Palestine,” says Waddah Charara a little bit less than sixty years after the Palestinian Nakba of 1948, as he painstakingly describes to me the topography of the villages

surrounding Bint Jbayl—the southern Lebanese town his father’s family is originally from—and what they overlook on the other side of the border. “From Bint Jbayl,” he adds, “you see Sa’sa’. . . a colony, a settlement, which is *mythic* in my family’s stories. . . . I saw it before actually seeing it . . . both my paternal aunts used to talk to me about 1948. Theirs was not a political narration, and most probably their reports were fabricated.”²⁶

Palestine was not only geographically contiguous to southern Lebanese towns and villages from which one could spot the construction of settlements. The Lebanese bordering villages were integrated in more than one way into the economic, religious, medical, and administrative networks of pre-1948 Palestine. Traders would cross the borders from Yafa to sell their oranges and take wheat, barely, lentils, or corn in exchange, recalls Mahmoud Soueid, who as a child saw Palestinian currency before seeing the Lebanese one. Soueid was born in 1936 in Kfar Hamam, which is located at the southeastern tip of Lebanon, approximately at the intersection of the Syrian Golan Heights and northern Galilee. The village is part of the ‘Urqub region, which became known as “Fatah Land” in the late 1960s after the Palestinian resistance established its bases there and used it as a launching pad for its guerrilla operations. His father, a Sunni cleric who studied in Damascus, established a school and a library at the beginning of the twentieth century and became the imam of the poor village, which survived mainly on agriculture. Its residents held Syrian papers before the establishment of Lebanon in 1920, papers they kept even after that date. If someone fell sick in the village they were taken to the Jewish doctor in Hula. No one used to go to Saida. Palestine was closer.²⁷ The commerce with Palestine was integral to the everyday lives of these southerners, who experienced the Nakba as a severely disruptive event. In his first work of social science, Charara registered how, in the wake of 1948, Bint Jbayl became increasingly incorporated into the commercial and administrative spheres of the recently independent Lebanese state (1943). Around the same time, modern political organizations—the Ba’th—also started attracting some of the town’s inhabitants, particularly those who exited “the traditional life cycle such as: teachers, students and a small cohort of citizens.”²⁸

Born a few years before 1948, the soon to become militants were marked in their early years by the plight of the Palestinians in more than one way. As a result of the geographical contiguity of Palestine and Lebanon, around 100,000 Palestinians who were forcibly expelled by or fled Zionist and Israeli forces took refuge in Lebanon in the aftermath of 1948. The influx of refugees snatched some of these children from their private worlds and provided the impetus for some of their first public acts. Soueid, who was around twelve

years old then, wrote a poem in his school bulletin. Fifty years later he can only remember its first verse: “Honor your guests O Lebanon generously.”²⁹ Accompanied by other volunteers, he carried empty bags and knocked on people’s doors in the coastal city of Saida. Residents gave them cans of food, batteries, and clothes that they stocked in one place for some organizations to pick up and distribute to the refugees. Soueid wasn’t alone in taking part in gathering aid for the incoming refugees. Wajih Kawtharani (1941–), a member of Socialist Lebanon in the late 1960s and now a retired history professor at the Lebanese University, originally from the southern village of Ansar, was born and raised mostly in Beirut. Kawtharani was very young when the 1948 Palestinian Nakba took place:

I remember Palestinian refugees coming and living in our neighborhood. I remember we used to gather aid for them at the time. I saw them in the neighborhood. I was six or seven years old. [I thought at the time] there is a problem, these people have been wronged, they have been evicted from their lands and they need help.³⁰

Palestine was not a placeholder in their lives for a rightful anti-imperialist, nationalist cause mediated solely through passionate ideological rhetoric. Their geographic and generational position enabled them to see its plains, deal in its currency, visit Jewish doctors, and later on listen to the stories of exodus, write poems, and gather aid for the incoming refugees. During their teenage years, they were swept off their feet by the tidal waves of Arab nationalism that put the Palestine question at the heart of anticolonial struggles in the region. Two decades after the Nakba, they became main Lebanese allies of the Palestinian armed struggle for national liberation before some of them, like Waddah Charara—who theorized the alliance between the Palestinian revolution and the Lebanese Left—became staunch critics of it. That said, we are not there yet, and the militant intellectuals who founded Socialist Lebanon (1964) do not all originally come from southern Lebanon, which mediated an intimate relationship with Palestine.

*Our Arab Brothers in Algeria,
Egyptian Periodicals, and Iraqi Poets*

Certain constitutive events of this generation’s political coming of age and their repercussions no longer resonate in our present. Their echoes barely reached the shores of succeeding generations. Algeria’s anticolonial star, which ignited passionate anticolonial sentiments, sunk with time. Today only scars remain.

As he unfolds the cardinal nodes of his political awakening that followed the Palestinian Nakba, Wajih Kawtharani highlights the Nasserite tides and the Algerian struggle for national liberation. He goes back in time to a demonstration he joined in support of the Algerian militant Djamila Bouhired, who was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to death on terrorism charges by French colonial authorities in 1957. It is very likely that it was the same demonstration during which Fawwaz Traboulsi (1941–) tried to climb up the wall of the French embassy, to be pulled down by a policeman and hit by a rifle butt on his forehead.

Traboulsi was heir to a different legacy than the southern and Shi'i one. The son of a Greek Catholic Christian hotel owner from Mashghara—a village in the Bekka Valley—he hails from a different sectarian, regional, and class background.³¹ The family's famous hotel was a cosmopolitan microcosm that attracted prominent politicians—including Michel Aflaq, the founder and ideologue of the Ba'ath Party that Traboulsi joined while studying in Manchester around 1959—illustrious artists, and members of the haute bourgeoisie from around the world. The hotel did more than that, though. It played a crucial role in developing Traboulsi's consciousness of social differences, through mixing with its workers, particularly an older communist cousin, who worked there during high season. What he shares though with some of his future comrades is descent from a lineage of intellectuals. Traboulsi is the grandson of 'Issa Iskandar al-Ma'luf (1886–1956), an eminent multifaceted scholar: historian, linguist, editor, and collector of original manuscripts. The scar, from the rifle butt blow, is still visible on Traboulsi's forehead. It acts as a reminder of a young man once captivated by Djamila's "pale, innocent face" and the country of a million martyrs. "I was madly in love with Djamila Bouhired," writes Traboulsi in his memoir. "I even drew a pencil portrait of her that remained on my bedroom's wall for a long time."³² "And for truth's sake," he recalls, "Beirutis were never as giving toward an Arab cause as they were with the Algerian Revolution: in support, solidarity, and contributions. I remember scenes of Beirut's women taking off jewelry and bracelets to give them as donations."³³ Traboulsi's Algerian passion would lead many around him to mistake him for an Algerian national. Some years later, in 1961, when the "Evian negotiations" between the French colonizers and the FLN began, a delegation of Iraqi communists visited Traboulsi to congratulate him on his country's independence: "They wished me, in high militant seriousness, a quick and blessed return to the homeland."³⁴

In one of our numerous interviews, Waddah Charara reacted to my proposition that a number of intellectuals, such as Edward Said (1935–2003), considered the 1967 defeat of Arab armies against Israel to be a watershed moment

in their political consciousness by recounting the story of his first “political baptism.”

The Algerian events had already begun when I was eleven years old. There were already some clashes before the first of November 1954.³⁵ The 1967 of others was in my case joining a demonstration under the rain probably in January 1953 . . . a demonstration I remember in great detail. . . . My parents had nothing to do with it at all.

We walked out of school and a young man, who was three or four years older than us, stood on a small mound of sand in Burj al-Barajneh—under what is now called the Rasul al-A'zam Mosque that back then consisted of wide stretches of sand populated by goldfinch hunters where we used to go whenever we had a lira and quarter to buy a bird—anyways he stood there and said: “O Youth, O Arabs, O Nationalists, French colonialism is slaughtering our brothers in Algeria.”

I understood [then] in the bodily sense of understanding, not merely in the discursive sense. Even though in 1952, when my dad used to come back from work . . . he used to bring home Egyptian newspapers. I remember I was ten years old when I started reading *al-Ithnayn* [Monday], which is similar to *Akhir Sa'a* [The Last Hour], *al-Musawwir* [The Photographer], but it had much more pictures in it. I remember very clearly Muhammad Naguib before Abdel Nasser . . . Abdel Nasser, of course, the smell of paper, ink, the hazy pictures of the [Suez] Canal battle [1956].

So even though there is a partial rupture between, on the one hand, home and its world, essentially my dad's world and the people you talk to there, and what they talk about and the magazines and school, on the other hand, which is a bunch of small kids learning dictation, grammar, “conjugaison” [conjugation of words in French], and a bit of math. . . . A certain translation, a certain investment of the atmosphere at home in this thing [the demonstration] took place that was surprising to me.

I remember this demonstration not only in its rain, the smell of wet clothes, my hair, and the thought that now my aunt is going to shout at me because I left myself under the rain and might catch a cold, and things of that sort, but also because there was some kind of implicit transmutation between these images, ideas, words, and emotions to something I was doing myself. I decided to walk out of school with the protest; some people did not go out. I was overwhelmed by great emotions. This was the baptism.³⁶

Abdel Latif Charara, Waddah's father, an Arab nationalist, was a prolific author, linguist, and translator. His many works include volumes on classical and contemporary Arabic poetry, a book on George Bernard Shaw, another on Arab nationalism—*Rub al-'Uruba* (The Spirit of Arabism) (1947) and republished later on—and translations (e.g., Herbert Marcuse). It was this Arab nationalist and anticolonial sensibility, cultivated through encounters with his father's Arab friends—such as the Syrian poet and statesman Badawi al-Jabal and the Iraqi poet Ahmad Safi al-Najafi—the reading of Egyptian periodicals, and the general atmosphere around the house, that was transmuted into Charara's participation in the demonstration of support to the Algerian national liberation struggle, generating tremendous emotions in the body of the eleven-year-old boy that transpire through the voice of the sixty-five-year-old man as he recounts with meticulous detail what he thought and how he felt on that rainy school day fifty-four years ago.³⁷ The intellectual hub that Waddah Charara grew up in transcended the frail borders of the Lebanese Republic and took part very early on in the fashioning of his Arab nationalist imaginary and sensibilities. Imagining the Arab nation, from Beirut, was made possible through the shared Arabic language, which tied these intellectuals together and circulated through mass media, such as Egyptian periodicals and, in the age of the transistor radio, through the fiery speeches of Gamal Abdel Nasser broadcast on Sawt al-'Arab (Voice of the Arabs).

Pan-Arab Passions: Politics, Sensibilities, and Institutions

The “Arab Cause,” recalls Azza Charara Beydoun, “was more dominant [in our lives] than Lebanese concerns.”³⁸ Charara Beydoun, a retired professor of social psychology at the Lebanese University and feminist thinker, joined Socialist Lebanon shortly after it was founded in the mid-1960s. Although they are siblings, Azza Charara Beydoun and Waddah Charara did not grow up together as a result of their parents' divorce. They also belong to different linguistic-intellectual universes. While he left for undergraduate studies in Lyon (1959) and then went back to France in the early 1970s to finish his doctorate, she enrolled in the American University of Beirut for an undergraduate degree in mathematics and shifted to social psychology after a number of years as a math teacher in Lebanese public high schools. Foreign languages, in the case of these siblings—as in the case of all these intellectual militants—is a crucial matter that provides insight into the readings, influences, and literary sensibilities and imaginaries out of which an intellectual's habitus is fashioned.

One of the instrumental mediums carrying “The Arab Cause” was Sawt al-‘Arab (Voice of the Arabs), the Cairo-based radio station that broadcast a highly charged Arab nationalist rhetoric, the most effective of which were the speeches of Gamal Abdel Nasser. These speeches were a source of political education and induced a generalized popular mobilization in the Arab region.³⁹ Sawt al-‘Arab was designed, according to Ahmad al-Sa‘id, the radio station’s best-known presenter and general manager,

to explain to them [the Arab people] the ideals of the July Revolution, making them aware of the many plots they faced. The main aims of The Voice of the Arabs, therefore, were to liberate the Arab people; to unite the Arab countries; to liberate Arab resources from imperialism’s grasp; and to encourage the use of those resources for the development of Arab civilization, science and culture.⁴⁰

These were times, remembers Abbas Beydoun, when borders between Arab countries were thought to have been erased by the engulfing tidal wave of Arab nationalism:

There was no sense of the borders at the time. This tide seemed as if it is one homogenous force, and it seemed as if there is a unified Arab history that was being made. There was no meaning to the [existing] borders. We were all part of this tide. . . . When communists in Iraq or in Syria talked about some borders, or the Ba‘thists, after the failure of the union [after 1961], this talk seemed unintelligible.⁴¹

The resistance to recognize the borders and specific national affiliations of the different Arab countries during this time were evident in the discourses of Arab nationalist movements that “refused to say, for example, the Syrian people, the Lebanese people, the Egyptian people; they used to say the Arab people in Syria, the Arab people in Lebanon, the Arab people in Egypt.”⁴²

Arab nationalism is mostly remembered as a world saturated with strong political emotions. Its anticolonial sentiments and nationalist pride were perfectly conveyed by Nasser’s demotic speeches; nationalist poems, novels, and songs; political pamphlets; and iconic photographs and portraits, such as those of Djamila Bouhired that Traboulsi hung on his wall. Charara recalled being overwhelmed by great emotions during the Algerian demonstration.⁴³ Azza Charara Beydoun recalls how as a twelve-year-old she strongly lived through Nasser’s speech as he declared the nationalization of the Suez Canal on July 23, 1956. A few years later, the end of the short-lived union between the Egyptian and Syrian republics (1958–61) made her fall

sick: “I had a fever,” she recalls. “I took it somatically . . . just so that you know how emotional it was, and I was reading about how people were going to Damascus and talking about how handsome Abdel Nasser was. This is the emotional thing.”⁴⁴

The Arab nationalist fervor was not only diffused through the circulation of various media that young men and women read, listened to, and looked at. It also inhabited educational institutions. At some point in the 1950s al-Kulliyya al-‘Amiliyya (‘Amili College) in Beirut, which was dominated by Nasserists and members of the Arab Nationalist Movement, received a visit from Anwar al-Sadat to conclude an agreement between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the school whereby the Egyptian government would staff the college with Egyptian public school teachers.⁴⁵ Wajih Kawtharani was taught by these Egyptian school teachers who mainly taught Beirut school children history, geography, and the Arabic language. These were subjects that, it need not be emphasized, easily lend themselves to being infused with the Arab nationalist zeitgeist.

Other schools were turned into quasi-political party centers where meetings and ideological education took place simultaneously with the school curriculum, especially during turbulent times, such as the short civil war that Lebanon witnessed in 1958. Recalling the atmosphere at al-Thanawiyya al-Ja‘fariyya, a Shi‘i high school located in the southern city of Sur (Tyre), Abbas Beydoun tells the story of his first political engagements:

When I was thirteen, I was one of those who were politically active, because in al-Thanawiyya al-Ja‘fariyya . . . one of the strange things about this era was that the school itself was a quasi center for the Ba‘th Party, not only its teachers, but its administration—Ja‘far Sharaf al-Din [the school’s headmaster], who was an ally of the Ba‘th at the time—and its students. We used to attend party meetings in the classroom, the unit of party meetings was the class/grade, and they were the centers of party talk. The teachers who were party members used to go in, and in the middle of class you could ask about the constitution of the Ba‘th and the difference between Arab socialism and communist socialism. . . . There was no distinction between the school and the party center, and it was not thought to be strange—the swamping of all aspects of life with politics during that time used to make it seem normal.

During this period I was a Ba‘thist. Since I was a precocious kid, they overlooked my age, and they promoted me especially that my young age was not correlated with how much I knew. Everyone in school was a

Ba'athist, but they had little interest in the theoretical side of the party, which consisted of a couple of pages, the constitution, and the [Michel] Aflaq readings. It did not take much time to read them, yet only a few had read them. So, at thirteen, fourteen, I was a reference about these things, a *hujja* [authority].⁴⁶

Around 1961, when the union between Egypt and Syria came to an end, the Ba'ath was one of the strongest parties in Lebanon, especially in Beirut, according to Mahmoud Soueid. As he was telling me the story behind his leaving the party when a significant group of Lebanese Ba'athists decided to split, protesting the leadership's position in Damascus that backed the dissolution of the Syrian union with Egypt in 1961, Soueid answered my interjection about why he thought the Ba'ath was stronger than Nasserism:

Yes, of course, it was stronger because the party was there before Nasserism came into being . . . and, second, it had an ideology. Nasserism was feeling its ideological way through Nasser's experience; he did not start from a pan-Arabist position. And, third, Nasserism may have become stronger later on the level of the masses but the Ba'ath attracted intellectuals. It was either the Ba'ath or the Arab Nationalist Movement. There was nothing else, or the Syrian Nationalists [if one decided to go] in another direction. . . . And, of course, we and the Syrian Nationalists were fighting. We had ideological fights, and discussions that spanned whole nights, [discussing] whether [we should aim for] Syrian unity or Arab unity . . . a Syrian nation or an Arab nation.⁴⁷

Muhsin Ibrahim (1936–), who would much later in the 1970s occupy the post of secretary general of the Organization of Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL)—among the many roles he played in Lebanese and Arab politics—was one of the leaders of the Arab Nationalist Movement at the age of twenty after its first conference in 1956. Ibrahim recalls his early years of engagement:

MI: In 1952–53, when I was around seventeen or eighteen [years] of age, I met the “Arab Nationalist Youth” that would become the kernel of the Arab Nationalist Movement. The first generation: George Habash, Hani el Hindi, and Ahmad al-Khatib. . . . I was considered, on the level of Lebanon, to be the symbol of the second generation. And despite what usually happens with students as part of growing up—you go into a party and then you get out of it—I did not. . . . The Palestinian question was very important for the Arab Nationalist Movement. We were just three years away from the Nakba; all of this generation grew up in this mood.

FB: And Abdel Nasser, what was your position vis-à-vis him?

MI: Abdel Nasser, he came later on. He was still on a trial period.⁴⁸

Muhsin Ibrahim's early leadership experience with the Arab Nationalist Movement is indicative of how a difference of a few years between himself (born in 1936) and those born in the early 1940s—such as Traboulsi, Beydoun, and Charara—plays itself out vis-à-vis political engagement and the relation to Abdel Nasser. Ibrahim was already politically active when the Free Officers took hold of power in Egypt in 1952, and had already assumed leadership positions by the age of twenty when Nasser became the president of Egypt. His Arab nationalist sensibility was not fashioned by what was being broadcast, produced, and achieved in Cairo but, rather, what was taking place in Cairo was being closely monitored in order to formulate a position regarding these developments. The Arab Nationalist Movement later aligned itself with Nasserist politics and for a period of eight years Ibrahim developed, despite his young age, a close relationship with Abdel Nasser, traveling from Beirut to Cairo to meet him once a month on average. The relationship with Abdel Nasser deteriorated and eventually come to an end in the aftermath of the June 1967 defeat against Israel. The Lebanese branch of the Arab Nationalist Movement, with Ibrahim at its head, would undergo an auto-critique around 1968, reshape the organization internally, and adopt the name of *Munazzamat al-Ishtirakiyyin al-Lubnaniyyin* (Organization of Lebanese Socialists).⁴⁹

The tidal waves of Arab nationalist sentiment did not engulf everything in their way. A majority of Lebanon's Christian population supported the pro-Western politics of President Camille Chamoun (1952–58). "Strengthened by foreign backing, the complicity of the bourgeoisie, and Maronites mobilization," Chamoun, Traboulsi notes, "exacerbated sectarian tensions as no other political leader had done before him. With the majority of the Muslim leaders outside parliament, the Muslim 'street' was massively attracted to the Nasserite and anti-colonialist discourse."⁵⁰ While growing up, some of these intellectuals straddled heterogeneous social worlds. At times, the political sensibilities developed at home—in the extended sense of family, neighborhood, and friends—clashed with the predominant atmosphere at school. Some of these intellectuals spent a part of their teenage years in schools where the mood was largely opposed to Arab nationalism. Waddah Charara spent three years in the mid-1950s as an intern in *al-Ma'had al-Lubnani*—Lebanese College—located in Bayt-Shabab, a Christian village in Mount Lebanon. His Shi'i southern origins from Bint Jbayl, the Arabism of his father, and the Egyptian periodicals lying around the house

were very different from the new setting. When he moved there, Charara was already “armored with Arabism”; it was there

that what we call Arabism . . . this world of ideas, feelings, opinions, resonances . . . found its formulation. The school’s students were practically all children of Maronite immigrants and two or three Syrian Nationalists. . . . And I was, along with two Shi’i sons of immigrants from Tyre, . . . in a certain sense, facing these people. . . . This year I started wearing the *Watani al-Arabi* [My Arab Homeland] pin that Arab nationalists had made popular and was later adopted by the Ba’th. I also began contacting some relatives who were members of the Ba’th.⁵¹

Ahmad Beydoun also spent some years in schools with radically opposed politics. Between 1956 and 1958 he was enrolled in a school in Mashmusha—not far from the coastal town of Saida—that is affiliated with a Christian convent. The majority, he recalls, were pro-Chamoun and pro-Phalangists: “There was a hatred of Nasserism . . . this was the atmosphere [at the time]. . . . I used to write Arab nationalist poems on Algeria and Abdel Nasser.”⁵² Lebanese schools played a central role in fostering and sharpening the sense of belonging to the Arab nation. Whether these schools were receiving direct Egyptian aid, teachers, and visits by Anwar al-Sadat and becoming hubs of political party activity, in case they were pro-Arab nationalist, or whether they were Lebanese nationalist “haters” of Nasserism, they provided avenues to foster Arab nationalist rhetoric and emotions. Arab nationalist belonging gathered in the family and neighborhood surroundings could also be sharpened in the confrontations with Lebanese nationalists in school.

The 1958 “Revolution” and Operation Blue Bat

Camille Chamoun’s alignment with Western powers during his presidency—indexed by the Lebanese government getting six million dollars’ worth of US arms and economic aid in 1953 and allowing the US Air Force to use Lebanon’s air space for reconnaissance missions in 1954—was exacerbated by his support of the Baghdad Pact signed in February 1955.⁵³ Although Lebanon did not join the pact signed by the pro-Western governments of Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran, it nonetheless refused to take part in the Arab Defense Pact put together in response by Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Chamoun’s positions on Arab affairs had internal and regional repercussions. It soured the Lebanese government’s relationship with Nasser’s Egypt and Syria, and led to the resignation of Hamid Frangieh, Lebanon’s minister of foreign affairs, in September 1955

after he “had assured ‘Abd al-Nasir [Abdel Nasser] in the name of his government that Lebanon would oppose Western military pacts.”⁵⁴ More importantly for our purposes was the mood of popular mobilization—mostly Muslim—against the president’s foreign policy. The signing of the Baghdad Pact led to violent demonstrations across the country. In Beirut, a student was shot and killed and others were wounded when the police opened fire outside the American University of Beirut.

Chamoun’s decisions not to sever diplomatic ties with France and England after the Suez crisis in 1956 resulted in the resignation of the Sunni prime minister, Abdallah al-Yafi, and minister Saeb Salam, both of them major Sunni political figures. Chamoun formed a new cabinet, handing the foreign affairs portfolio to Charles Malik, who was aligned with US foreign policy.⁵⁵ In April 1957, the Lebanese Parliament approved the country’s adherence to the Eisenhower Doctrine. A couple of months later, the US-backed president organized national elections in which the major Sunni opposition leaders lost their seats.⁵⁶ By 1958, the president’s politics managed not only to alienate Lebanese Muslims but also to divide the Christians who developed a “third force” to call for neutrality in Arab affairs. Moreover, Chamoun did not deny the circulating rumors about his intention to renew his presidential mandate—an unconstitutional act. The clashes began in the wake of the assassination of Nassib al-Matni, a journalist and editor strongly critical of the regime’s foreign policy and corruption. The opposition controlled three quarters of Lebanon after two months of fighting. On July 14, 1958, while the fighting was still going on in Lebanon, the Iraqi monarchy was ousted.⁵⁷ On that same day, Chamoun “reiterated his request for a US military intervention within 48 hours, ‘or else a second pro-western Arab regime will fall in its turn.’”⁵⁸ In less than twenty-four hours the US-initiated Operation “Blue Bat,” which “included the landing of 15,000 American soldiers, backed by another 40,000 on the 70 warships of the US Navy’s Sixth Fleet, in the first operation of its kind since the War.”⁵⁹ The Americans ended up not defending Chamoun but choosing his successor, the Lebanese army general Fuad Chehab, elected on July 31, 1958, less than two weeks after the Marines had landed on Lebanese shores. Chehab’s name was mentioned in the American-Egyptian negotiations that year and he “fulfilled the condition of Eisenhower, who wanted a military man.”⁶⁰ By November 1958, the Blue Bat had decamped.

The summer of 1958 is an essential episode in modern Lebanese history and in the coming of “political” age of a generation growing up in the wake of the Palestinian Nakba and through the high tides of Arab nationalism. It witnessed the interlocking of local (sectarian tensions), regional (inter-Arab relations),

and international (Cold War) political strands. Sixteen-year-old Charara was already the Ba'athist official of his high school in Beirut. His older relatives forged his papers to get him into the party. Mahmoud Soueid was posted at the party's radio station, also located in Charara's high school. Soueid was in charge of drafting the radio news bulletin and distributing pamphlets in the capital at night. Soueid and Charara missed each other during that summer. They met later on and took part in founding Socialist Lebanon in 1964.

When the violence erupted, Charara's parents sent him south to Saida, away from the bombings in Beirut. He did not fight in 1958, though he received some rudimentary military training in a public school at the hands of a Palestinian "commando, [this is] before the *fidai*'yi label came about."⁶¹ Charara would pass by the Makassed School in Saida, where Ma'rif Sa'd, a local Arab nationalist political leader, surrounded by members of the Arab Nationalist Movement, established his headquarters. Among those around was Muhsin Ibrahim, "although I did not know him at the time," recalls Charara.⁶² Ibrahim, who is approximately six years older than Charara, was already a high-ranking member of the Arab Nationalist Movement. Twelve years later, Waddah Charara and Muhsin Ibrahim would lead negotiations and decide to unify Socialist Lebanon and the Organization of Lebanese Socialists, giving birth to the Organization of Communist Action in Lebanon (1970).

Meanwhile, Fawwaz Traboulsi was an intern at Brummana High School. During his time at the boarding school, located in a Christian village of Mount Lebanon, he had, together with a bunch of his mates, formed a secret Arab nationalist leftist group in 1956 to face the Syrian Nationalists at school. "We went to Beirut in 1958," Traboulsi told me,

and insulted the US Marines [in their own language] after they landed. We were in a high school that was mostly composed of Arabs and Muslims in Brummana. The atmosphere tensed up, we were accused by the village folk of having arms, and the Syrian Nationalists denounced us and began to conduct quasi-armed rounds around the schools with hunting rifles.⁶³

Traboulsi spent the rest of the summer hiding in a northern Christian village. An arrest warrant was issued by a judge after one of the members of the Brummana High School pan-Arabist group was caught with a notebook containing the names of those who contributed money to support the "popular resistance," that is, the opposition forces. In the wake of the short civil war of 1958, the soon to be comrades continued their militancy under the banner of

Arab nationalism, mostly the Ba‘th, before exiting and diving into a Marxist political and theoretical universe.

Autochtones and Fugitives: Generations of Southern Intellectuals

Arab nationalist thought and sentiments interpellated these young men and women in the first decade after Lebanon’s independence from the French Mandate (1943). That said, they were also the products of Lebanese state institutions—public high schools, teachers’ colleges, the Lebanese University—and their pedagogical practices, such as learning French and English. In varying degrees they shared the institutional spaces and the cultural and linguistic tools of the Lebanese nationalists they were opposing. This was not always the case for the generation of intellectuals preceding them.

“My father,” recalls Waddah Charara, “was one of the first ‘Amili writers who began writing in Lebanese newspapers, contemporary, modern newspapers such as *al-Adib* [The Writer] and *al-Adab* [Literatures].”⁶⁴ Abdel Latif Charara belonged to a generation of southern Shi‘i writers who witnessed the withering away of a world, one where “the road to Najaf despite its length and its roughness was more congenial than the road to Beirut or Damascus.”⁶⁵ The first, as Abbas Beydoun maintains, is

a trip to a safe haven; where the sons follow in the footsteps of the fathers. . . . It is an internal immigration, while the second, despite its proximity, is a displacement and a journey that is not guided by the knowledge of forefathers and their memories.⁶⁶

The story of transition from Najaf to Beirut is not only one of shifting directions from the centuries-old path to the site of religious learning toward the capital of an all too recent republic in contact with metropolitan fields of cultural production. It is also, for Beydoun, a narrative about the divergent cultural imaginaries of the constitutive communities of Lebanon. The Lebanese nationalist literature articulated by Western-facing—when not residing there—authors such as Khalil Gibran and his cohort, portraying and satirizing life in the mountains of Lebanon where they grew up, was a far cry from the world of the Najaf-trained clerics and their literatures. “My dad,” says Abbas Beydoun,

talked about Arab nationalism, but if you take the titles of his books, *they don’t mean anything*. [He wrote a book on] Umm Salama, which is the name of one of the prophet’s wives, who was close to Ali, and

another one on the biography of the prophet, most probably from a Shi'i perspective.⁶⁷

"They don't mean anything" means that there was no uptake for this type of literature in a national field whose hegemonic references, metropolises, and imaginaries were elsewhere. Their metropole, recalls Abbas Beydoun, was Egypt. "They were," he continues,

Modernist, but from the other side, not à la Gibran [Khalil Gibran], Mikhail Naimy, and Maroun Abboud. This world was not familiar to them. The modernity of Egyptians . . . they could deal with it more. First, this modernity was an Islamic modernity, while here [in Lebanon] it was a Christian modernity in one sense or another . . . in all senses.⁶⁸

Not only were their upbringings, intellectual references, cultural and literary imaginaries, and practices different from the budding nationalist field, but some of them did not possess any other languages than Arabic, which led to their increasing marginalization as they could not be *à jour* with what is happening in the world, that is, the metropolises. These 'Amili authors also became separated, as Abbas Beydoun recalls, from their own progeny:

When I began opening my eyes [to the world] and becoming a mature person, it seemed to me that my dad the writer and intellectual did not suit me. Very quickly I found myself in a different world, maybe one of Lebanese culture, and as a result *we had a problem of language*. In a novel I wrote and published called *Tablil Damm* [Blood Test] . . . I talked about my dad. His voice used to sound strange to me. It is something that needs a psychoanalyst in order to make sense of. It was as if he was a person that is not there, "*inexistant*" strange and rare, or that he is not going to be repeated. . . . [He was] a person that used to write and read to me, and I never felt any sympathy with what he used to read to me. . . . I never had much connection with his writing, and it is difficult for me to consider myself a continuity to this writing.⁶⁹

Abdel Latif Charara taught himself English and French, which he used to read but not speak, according to Beydoun, and "if you look at the titles of his books, there is one on Bernard Shaw, another one on al-Hajjaj—but then al-Hajjaj, there is something new in this, it is not a Shi'i subject, it is wider—and a book on Arab nationalism. These three things put him in a different context, a Lebanese, regional, and international context."⁷⁰ Through contributing to new intellectual discussions that appeal to audiences beyond the Shi'i community,

Abdel Latif Charara managed in these times of historical transition to escape the marginalization those intellectuals, like Beydoun's father, suffered. They became, Beydoun recalls, "'autochtone,' local." "They wrote," he adds, "without publishing and consumed what they produced in their own milieu. Their relationship with Lebanese culture was mainly weak."⁷¹

Communism also provided an alternative community of thought and practice for this generation of 'Amili intellectuals. Husayn Muruwwa (1910–87) is another important figure of that generation in the Lebanese political and intellectual field.⁷² While he was studying and living in Najaf in preparation to assume clerical responsibilities in the footsteps of his father, Muruwwa became attracted to Marxist writings and the politics of the Iraqi Communist Party. Subsequently, Muruwwa, like the Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawihiri, put an end to his religious career. He later became a member of the Lebanese Communist Party's Central Committee and a respected Marxist thinker who taught Islamic philosophy at Lebanese University. Muhammad Charara, Abdel Latif's brother, also got radicalized during the 1940s in Iraq and dropped his religious aspirations in order to become a communist militant and author.⁷³

On February 17, 1987, during one of the bleak episodes of the Lebanese civil war, Husayn Muruwwa was shot dead, at the age of seventy-seven, in his home in Beirut. It is widely believed that a radical Shi'i Islamist faction carried out the assassination either by the orders, or under the auspices, of the Syrian Assadist regime. Four years before the collapse of the Soviet Union and eight years after the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, a long time had passed since Jawahiri's fiery poems on the Battle of Stalingrad and the Marxist radicalization of young clerics in Iraq. A long intergenerational journey: from Najaf to the central committees of communist parties in the anticolonial decades of the mid-twentieth century, and into the militant Shi'ism inspired by the Iranian Revolution in the last two decades of that century.

Coda: Then and Now

In his first work, *Transformation d'une Manifestation Religieuse dans un Village du Liban-Sud (Ashura)* (1968), Waddah Charara examined the changes in the ritual of 'Ashura in light of the structural transformations occurring in Bint Jbayl in the wake of the Palestinian Nakba. He notes the shifting of the location of the "religious manifestation" from the private sphere of the family to the public Husayni clubs, and the new participation of Ba'thist students, teachers, and traders in the festivities alongside the religious lector. These party members mapped the Palestinian Nakba on the religious story: the image of al-Imam

Husayn corresponded to that of Palestine, his murderers to “the enemies,” his battle to that of survival and progress, and finally the justice of his cause to the political and social content carried by the modern political organization.⁷⁴ Charara, in the Arabic abstract to the French text, related its main problematic as follows:

The confluence between a religious content and a political one in a historical period of transition from one mode of social organization to another is an issue that poses the question of the distinction between the layers of the social structure in “backwards” countries, their degrees of independence, and their evolution.⁷⁵

It is the specific form *modernization* takes in “backwards”—placed between brackets in the original text—countries via the articulation between the religious and political levels that Charara was investigating.⁷⁶ In the mid-1950s the Ba’th, he observed, shifted the mythical understanding of the Nakba, which made sense of the event by attributing it to an “evil conspiracy against Arabs,” in the direction of a “relative rationalization.”⁷⁷

Three years after the end of the long civil and regional Lebanese wars, Charara wrote a brief autobiographical piece “The Faltering Belonging: Segments from a (Pre-) Lebanese Autobiography.”⁷⁸ In the twenty-five years that separate the two pieces, the beginning of the Lebanese wars in 1975 was a crucial turning point for Charara, witnessing his exit from radical politics and Marxist thought. The author begins by noting how his awakening to belonging to the Lebanese “homeland” took place at the beginning of the war in 1975. He wrote, “As much as I try to, I don’t remember that a sense of belonging to Lebanon was a common or desirable thing among the people I grew up with. And these were Lebanese Shi’a, and of their two types: the Shi’a of the southern rural town, and those of the religiously mixed coastal town.”⁷⁹ It is in this post-civil war context, which saw the fragmentation of the Lebanese polity mostly along sectarian lines, that Charara returned to his memories relating the absence of the Lebanese *national* referent and the predominance of infranational, familial, and regional solidarities in his childhood. The 1948 Nakba is recalled in order to reveal how the loss of the Palestinian homeland was narrated through provincial, self-sufficient (fabricated?) stories by the inhabitants of Bint Jbayl that put the town at the center of the action:

And what is true of families, and kin, is also true of towns. Stories circulate, as well as storytellers, from one community to the other, without any alteration affecting the stories’ structure. The meaning of the event

[whether related by family, kin, or townfolk] does not need any action that was undertaken by others to be fully grasped. The town is deemed a unit, in case its inhabitants . . . manage to narrate a story through which they recognize their town and themselves.⁸⁰

From the story of a tentative modernization of a southern town in 1968, we move in 1994 to a story of the strength and parochialism of infranational communal loyalties and the absence of the national referent.

The war, and its aftermaths, triggered a revisionist history of the place of the national referent in the first years of the independent Lebanese Republic. The discovery, or rather the recovery, of Lebanon, and the rethinking of the “Lebanese question” in the wake of the country’s implosion and after years of Arab nationalist and radical leftist militancy in support of the Palestinian resistance, is a common trope of this generation of disenchanted leftist militants—both Wajih Kawtharani and Azza Charara Beydoun, by way of example, mentioned it during our meetings. Charara found it, that is, Lebanon, absent among the more entrenched sectarian, familial, and regional solidarities of his own southern Shi’i background, which he refers to as *abli* loyalties.⁸¹ The awakening to his belonging to the Lebanese homeland would not only be contrasted with the country’s infranational communal solidarities but also with their supranational connections, namely, Arab nationalism. Charara, the former Ba’thist, who, in 1968, during the height of his Marxist militancy, interpreted the impact of the Ba’th as one of relative rationalization, inverted his analysis a quarter of a century later. Arab nationalism became the “religion [creed] of the *Ahl* [kin].”⁸² Pan-Arab ideological politics were no longer part of a modernization story; they became in 1994 the supranational “religion” of the infranational loyalties whose articulation undermined the intermediary chain: the Lebanese nation. What Charara’s post-civil war autobiographical piece elided was the specific articulation of the idea of Lebanese nationalism on the then dominant Christian Maronite pro-Western imaginary of Lebanon, and the peripheral position the Shi’i community and southern Lebanon occupied in the new republic.

Charara’s recollections do not only touch on the question of Palestine and Arab nationalist ideology. He also revisits the aftermaths of national liberation and the violent practices of the anticolonial movements he supported in his youth. The aftermaths of Algeria’s liberation were marshaled to call into question the reified usage of Frantz Fanon’s work in academic fields such as postcolonial and cultural studies. “Worlds, and hypotheses, are erected, while forgetting that Fanon wrote between 1957 and 1962–63 in the fold of the FLN [Front

de Libération National],” he mentions during one of our meetings, “without giving any importance to the social and historical becoming of Algeria.”⁸³ This comment about Fanon’s contemporary usage in disciplinary settings was thrown in as an aside in the middle of a conversation where he expressed his reservation about a style of intellectual practice he dubbed “studding” (*tarsi*). This style, a superficial theoretical rhetoric of sorts is premised on the appropriation of particular concepts and their use without paying attention to both their genealogy and how they articulate with, and relate to, unfolding socio-historical processes. More importantly, Charara, nearly fifty years later, revisits the violent modalities of practice of the FLN and the internecine fights between Algerian nationalists at the time. After relocating to Lyon (1959), Charara got involved in the Algerian struggle for independence. The young Lebanese student joined the Réseau Francis Jeanson. The Réseau helped the Algerians via a network of couriers that used to transport weapons (though very few), money, and fake papers and direct militants to safe hideouts. “I got to know at the time from a French Algerian woman,” he recalls, “that prostitution rings in France were in the hands of the Front de Libération.”⁸⁴ It was also during that time that he became aware of the “FLN’s assassinations of MNA [Algerian National Movement] militants, their forceful extraction of money, and liquidation of thieves.”⁸⁵ These practices gave rise to intense feelings of “horror and real disgust” that were quenched by espousing a vision of “political practice as always containing a fundamental share of violence and dirt.” This ideological justification, recalls the veteran militant intellectual, was inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Humanisme et terreur* (Humanism and terror) (1947), which he read around that time. Charara recites from memory in French a line from the book: “It goes something like this,” he says, “we don’t have to choose between purity and impurity but between different kinds of impurities.”⁸⁶ Around the same time, he began reading Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, which shifted the terrain of questions he was preoccupied with. The question of violence in politics became sidelined. By immersing himself in the Marxist tradition, Charara began to be captivated by the movement of History.