



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
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Personal Reflections

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Middle East Study Tour

Part 6

The recent history of Lebanon is one of armed conflict. The civil war, which lasted 15 years, from April 13, 1975–October 13, 1990, devastated the country's economy and infrastructure and began the emigration of Christians out of the country. Prior to the war, Christians were just over 50% of the country. They are now less than a third.

As we drove across the Green Line—the street that divided the Muslim and Christian areas during the war—we saw buildings still pockmarked from the fighting. Today with traffic crossing freely (except for the typical traffic jams), it is hard to imagine that this was a killing zone enforced by snipers hiding in the buildings fronting it. Yet hundreds of people had to cross it daily at risk of their lives. One of the persons we met during our visit related how she and her father would hold hands as together they dashed across the street. They had one rule. If either fell, the other would keep running or two, not one, would die.

Snipers were not the only danger. During the war, both Christian and Muslim militia kidnapped people for ransom. The father from the story above was one such person—he was never found. As a Christian, his daughter has learned to forgive those who bore responsibility for her father's disappearance.

The above-mentioned shift in demographics also reflects the growth of Shi'ite Muslims in Lebanon, especially in the southern part of the country. These changes in demographics have a political significance as well because Hezbollah has its strength in the Shia community.

In 2005, the Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, was assassinated. He was quite popular, and his death created a huge backlash against extremism and saw the election of a moderate government.

In 2006, Hezbollah in south Lebanon sent rockets into north Israel. The Israeli government responded forcefully, with a military campaign that took a toll on the infrastructure and left south Lebanon covered with carpet bombs.

It wasn't long after the 2006 hostilities that I went to Lebanon as part of a delegation of North American clergy. On our first night in Beirut, we were awakened as a delegation by a bomb that went off near our hotel. One could also hear small arms fire in the area. Due to the instability, everywhere we went we were surrounded by a military guard. Sections of the city had been reduced to rubble by the Israeli air strikes. On our visit to south Lebanon, we had to be careful to walk only in the areas delineated with yellow construction tape. Outside those areas, one risked being maimed or killed by carpet bombs which had been dug into the soil.

At the same time, forces opposed to the moderate government were systematically killing members of the cabinet in an attempt to bring the government down. In defense of their lives, those still living sequestered themselves in the Prime Minister's compound for about nine months. They basically put themselves under house arrest to save their lives and their government.

On this trip, one saw little evidence of the destruction of four years ago due to the rebuilding effort that is present in the country. High-rise building cranes dot the skyline everywhere in Beirut. Other areas of the country are seeing similar growth.

On the surface, things appear quite normal now. But just underneath that surface appearance is a subterranean uneasiness. Talking with one young college student, I asked him if his classmates felt hopeful for Lebanon's future. His response that most of them planned to travel (emigrate) when they graduated.

Today's local newspaper contained a lot of conjecture about the highly anticipated report of the UN Tribunal established to determine who was behind Hariri's assassination. There is much speculation that it will be released soon and that it will point to Hezbollah as involved in the assassination. Many fear that such a report will bring renewed violence to the country. Some fear the possibility of Muslim against Muslim violence because Hariri was a Sunni Muslim and Hezbollah is Shi'ite. All in all, this is a fearful time for Lebanon.

Still, many in the Christian church with whom we spoke feel that they are called of God to remain, perhaps as the small leaven in the loaf that appears so inconsequential in proportion to the whole, but, nonetheless a witness to Christ in this land.

Holy Spirit, comforter and encourager of the faithful, grant to the Church in Lebanon the hope of our faith and joy in tribulation. Amen.

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