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PART VII

CONTEMPORARY DILEMMAS
Chapter 17

PRESENT LEBANESE PROBLEMS

Political changes overseas tended to affect the carry over of the group concept to a marked degree in Cleveland.

When the Lebanon, that mountain state of Greater Syria declared its independence in 1943 to become the country of Lebanon, an identity crisis arose among many Arab-Americans. It brought them and their non-Arab fellow Americans into a dilemma ranging from mild confusion to an extreme degree of nationalistic fervor that rose and fell according to the political stresses overseas and the argumentative abilities of partisans on this side of the water.

Those who had been known for decades in America as Syrians now had new options. While many of the early immigrants had come to America from Damascus, Aleppo and those cities of Greater Syria which remained unchanged in the political divisions, most of the Arab-Americans in Cleveland and neighboring Ohio cities found their ancestral ties within the newly declared country of Lebanon. To these people, the home cities and villages of which they had often spoken with warm remembrance and longing, those towns of Aramoon, Kuba, Khirbet, Zahleh, Aiteneet, Saghbein, Mazraha and Ma'asghura, were no longer in Syria, but in the new country, Lebanon. Therefore, they would now be called Lebanese, thus confusing their less-informed fellow Americans even more than themselves.

"What's the difference between Syrian and Lebanese?" their neighbor would ask.
"Well, you see, there's this new country now, and they have been fighting for independence for a long time."
"From the Syrians?"
"Well no, from the Turks, and then from the French – from the Mandate."
"Well, if you were Syrian before, and you spoke Arabic, what do you call your language now, Lebanese?"
"No, you see, there is no Lebanese language; we all have Arabic as a common language. All over the Middle East, and in North Africa, the language of the Arab countries is Arabic."

Then would come the questions about language, history, nationality, who is Arab and who is not, what is Phoenician and why – questions which continue under discussion today, the answers based on personal preference, emotion or bias, and not always on fact.

It would be difficult to understand the basis for the attitudes and political sympathies of most Lebanese Americans if we did not first glance at the complexities of the long, tragic history of the Lebanese struggle for independence. Since most of their forebears came to America during the period of occupation of the mother country by the Turkish Empire, the first generations were raised in that deliberately divisive social environment established by the Turks, the previously mentioned millet.

In this social structure in the motherland, politics, religion, government and group interaction were each dependent on the other, and this influence bore a heavy impression on the Lebanese in America.

In the latter centuries under occupation, nationalistic rebellions broke out throughout Syria, most often in the hilly
and hard to control Lebanon. These uprisings, motivated by patriots like Youssef Bey Karam, became more frequent and volatile during the middle 19th century. The Turks, in order to circumvent unification of the rebellions, would resort to their millet system to pit village against village and group against group, until finally the rebellions were reduced to infighting between one political faction and another, one religious faction and another.

Since most of the inhabitants of the Lebanon were Christian, the struggles became pitched battles between the Christian villages of the Lebanon and neighboring Druze or Moslem groups. That these confrontations of one group against the other were incited by the occupying force, the Turkish Empire, their common enemy, was too often forgotten by the warring factions.

It was Youssef Bey Karam who led the most intense of these revolutions against the Turkish government in 1860 in an effort to gain independence for the mountainous Lebanon region. With little manpower and less ammunition, he nevertheless managed to outmaneuver the Turkish Army in several battles. The uprising, however, deteriorated from revolution to a series of massacres, some perpetrated by the Turkish forces, some incited by them, pitting one group against another.

The massacres of the Year of ’60, El Sinth el Sitheen, were never forgotten by the Lebanese, and atrocity stories in increasingly explicit detail were recounted by generation after generation, strong in dramatic content but weak in cause and effect. Since the Turks were Muslims, then, the followers of Islam, be they Syrians, Turks or Lebanese came to be perceived by the Christians as the persecutors of 1860.
The memory of 1860 was one of the major factors that led to the final independence of Lebanon. Politics was little separated from religion, and, sadly, it was often forgotten by both Christians and Muslims that the early intellectuals, poets, and philosophers, who wrote, fought, and died for that long-sought independence were Christians, Muslims, and Druze whose love of the land transcended the limitations of religious affiliation.

In the final years before the dream of independence became at best a doubtful reality, the Roman Catholic influence of the French Mandate on the Eastern Christian Church, and that of American Protestant missionaries in Lebanese villages added to the sense of separateness of the Lebanon, whose inhabitants were in the majority Christian, from the rest of Greater Syria.

The governmental structure of Lebanon, based on representation by religious groups according to majority, in itself perpetuated the Turkish millet. The Lebanese, however, seemed to be able to function well enough in this system until the late 1950's, when the social inequities became so unbearable that a revolution broke out in 1958. From that time until the present, the system with its encapsulated power structures has been under attack periodically, either in politics or by outbreaks of violence. The civil war which began in Lebanon in 1975 not only split that country asunder but heaped confusion, fear and frustration upon the Lebanese-American community in the United States. The old clan and group loyalties, which for a time had been overcome by a concentrated Arab-American effort to cut across the religious, social, nationality and political patterns, came into prominence once again.
Religious differences deepened, partisanship intensified, and the sense of separateness created by the closing in of the groups gave the Arab-American community in the United States its first major regression in more than a hundred years.

In analyzing the political complexities which confront the Lebanese of Lebanon, the Lebanese expatriates of the civil war, and those Lebanese Americans who have allowed themselves to become embroiled in the politics of that nation, David Nader, a graduate student at Cleveland State University says in a paper presented in 1979:

Many of the expatriates, unable to put aside the struggle which consumes their nation, have transplanted rivalries which make Lebanese politics the most complicated in the Middle East into their new country, putting a strain on relations between the diverse ethnic and religious groups which make up Cleveland's large and heterogenous Arab-American community. There is evidence that the events in Lebanon, combined with the influx of the escapees of that conflict, may have aggravated longstanding religious and ethnic rivalries within the community which time and the balm of assimilation had begun to heal. It would be ridiculous to pretend that the bloody events in Lebanon, events in which almost everyone in that community has a personal stake, have not created a degree of factional division. From "The Unwilling Immigrants."
Chapter 18

A NEW IMMIGRATION

In 1967, the war between Israel and the Arabs scattered hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs out of the West Bank into exile. Of these, some made their way to the United States, many families finding homes in Cleveland. The majority of these new arrivals were Muslims from El-Bireh, the twin city of Ramallah, some of whose inhabitants had established homes and businesses in Cleveland years before.

The new Palestinian arrivals found jobs in semi-skilled categories, or opened small grocery stores. A few who were in the medical professions found openings in Cleveland hospitals.

This second immigration into Cleveland and other major American cities, unlike the first great wave of the 1890's was begun out of necessity, not by choice. Those Lebanese-Syrian peasants who had come in the earliest years were for the most part fleeing a hopeless future in the mother country. Their love and attachment to the land was a sentimental one of family roots, yet they recognized that the land was not theirs to govern. The second wave, following the wars of 1948 and 1967 was fiercely nationalistic, determined to win their country back, and unwilling to swear first allegiance to any except their occupied country.

More than eighty years had changed the Middle East, and the new arrivals were far better educated than the first great wave, immersed in the world's events, and unintimidated by the American way of life. Egyptian
professionals, about equally divided between the Muslim and Coptic Christian faiths, took their place in the universities, hospitals, industries, and service professions of the city. The Syrians who arrived at the same time were also highly skilled, well-educated, and represented in all the professional fields. Besides these immigrants from the Fertile Crescent were a few Iraqis, Jordanians, and Algerians.

International Implication for the Cleveland Arab Community

The Palestinian Refugee Problem in the Middle East had long aroused the sympathies of Cleveland Arab Americans. The war of 1967, brought vividly before their eyes, through the television and the printed media, fired them to seek ways to help alleviate the pathetic condition of human beings caught up in the tragic aftermath of a confrontation which had begun in 1948.

A number of Clevelanders called together by James Shalala and Joseph Nahra formed the Middle East Relief Committee and took as its slogan, the phrase. People, not Politics.

A clothing drive brought in tons of clothing which was shipped to Lebanon and Jordan where the greatest numbers of refugees had fled to camps thrown up for them by the United Nations.

A fund raising banquet brought in donations which were channelled to medical and social service agencies overseas.
Wedad Mouhaissan Hasan in El-Bireh prior to flight to America in 1967.
The Palestinian grandmothers of members of Cleveland's Palestinian Community.
Mrs. Yasir Allis and Miss Ruth Nader in Palestinian dress, at the nationalities reception in City Hall for Cardinal Mindzenty in 1974.
Work continued, and women members, particularly, conducted periodic rummage sales, Christmas card and boutique sales, evening "sahras" and membership drives to raise money.

When the immediate crisis had been met, the committee evolved into a welfare and educational organization which was called the Cleveland Middle East Foundation. Its main goals were to aid those of Arabic heritage both overseas and in the Cleveland area, to distribute educational materials, sponsor institutes and speaking programs, and to assist nationally organized welfare agencies.

The Middle East Foundation took a firm stand against political involvement in Middle East affairs, insisting that the work of foreign policy was up to the government and better out of the hands of individuals or groups, however well intentioned.

This determination of Cleveland Arab-Americans to remain detached politically from international matters suffered sharp reverses early in the fall of 1972. In September of that year, Israeli athletes in Munich for the Olympics were killed in an attack by Palestinians, and Cleveland Arabs and Arab Americans suffered a backlash of denigration and humiliation that was perhaps even more devastating than that which they had experienced during the 1967 war. Editorials, cartoons, letters to the editor, radio and television commentaries and personal insults caused deep wounds in the Arabic speaking community. The Arab Americans who had settled into the second and third generation of American nativity found themselves forced to explain, to debate, and to justify their existence in their own
country. Arab students were brought in for interrogation at immigration offices, and were often threatened with deportation. Arab medical residents were questioned at their hospitals, or suffered the more painful embarrassment of learning that their superiors and co-workers had been questioned about them. Arabs and Arab Americans found themselves under surveillance at airports, railroads, and bus stations. There were instances of people being taken from their homes and questioned. Some, who were considered leaders in their communities, were vocal in their opinions, or whose jobs were in fields like engineering were visited in their offices by the FBI for a "little friendly discussion."

Within a month, Arab Americans throughout the United States had become acquainted with "Operation Boulder" the government directive which required that all Arabs entering or leaving the United States, residing in the United States on permanent visas, or studying in American Universities be kept under close surveillance. Arab-Americans who were known as activists and leaders in their communities were treated in the same manner.

It was at that time that an incident occurred which aroused the indignation of Clevelanders working at the Cleveland Port. On October 7th they learned that eight Arab sailors on a freighter flying the green, white, and red striped flag of Kuwait were confined on board and not permitted to go ashore because they had not been granted entry visas at their previous port of call in Toronto.

Their papers were in order but the American consulate in Canada had refused them visas while seamen of other nationalities were permitted to enter the Port of Cleveland.
Angered by what they recognized as a discriminatory action, the Good Samaritan dock workers notified the pastor of the Maronite Church, Rt, Rev. Joseph Feghali. After visiting the seamen, the priest informed the Imam of the Islamic Center, since the seamen were Muslim, that two of the men were ill and wanted to see a spiritual leader of their own faith.

Msgr. Feghali then called members of the Arab-American community, one of whom managed to get on board and interview the restricted seamen. Her report was eventually filed with the Department of State.

On October 8th, a front page story in the Cleveland Plain Dealer quoted the deputy director of the State Department's visa section. "There has been no directive issued against Arabs per se," he said. "It's not a national policy. This is an isolated incident. I don't know why they weren't issued visas."

The newspaper stories of Sunday, October 8, and Monday October 9th, aroused public sentiment. On October 10, the Cleveland Press reported that a Lebanese Maronite priest from Eaton, Pennsylvania had come up to Cleveland to investigate and would go to Washington to pursue the matter.

On October 11th, the Cleveland Plain Dealer printed a story that the Cleveland Chapter of the American Jewish Committee had sent a letter of protest to the Immigration Service. The chairman of that committee suggested in the letter that bureaucratic procedures were substituted for good sense. Nevertheless, it was too late for the seamen to enter Cleveland. The publicity and protests lodged with the Immigration Service enabled them finally to disembark at
the next American port of call. If that had not been possible, they would have found themselves sixty days on the water without stepping on dry land, since their point of departure had been from Yokahama, to which they would eventually return.

"Operation Boulder" and incidents such as that which befell the Arab seamen were determining factors in the decision made by some Clevelanders that their activities must now become politically oriented. Members of the Cleveland Middle East Foundation, the Cleveland Eastern Rite churches, and the Islamic Center met to form an ad hoc committee which would respond to crises arising in the Middle East that might affect their lives and well-being as Americans in the United States. This group set as its goal the initiation of positive action with United States government officials to affect an even handed attitude by the United States toward the critical situation in the Middle East.

The committee chose as its name the Cleveland Council on Arab-American Relations. Mr. Minor George was elected chairman and Mrs. Mary Haddad Macron served as executive secretary.

For a year the group arranged programs for speakers on the Middle East, promoted radio and television appearances for their members and visitors to the community, participated in peace marches and other demonstrations to bring attention to the crucial problems of that area.

Among the most significant of these programs was a city-wide memorial service following the downing of a civilian Libyan airliner in 1973 by Israeli planes over the Sinai. Members of all Cleveland religious denominations
were invited to attend, and present were Melchites, Maronites, Orthodox, Coptic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, Druze and Jews. The service was held in St. Maron Maronite Catholic Church and, probably for the first time in an American Eastern Rite Church, the Fathiha, a prayer of the Islamic Service was sung by the Imam of the Islamic Center.

During that year, political involvement by Arab-Americans was gaining strength throughout the country. It was necessary now to have a national voice. A group of Washington business and professional men called together a conference in Detroit which saw the establishment of the National Association of Arab Americans. Three Clevelanders were among the twenty-one members elected to the first Board of Directors. Unlike the groups which had been organized in the past for social and cultural purposes, the aim of the National Association of Arab Americans was to establish a strong political base in Washington, within easy accessibility to Capitol Hill.

Cleveland Arab-Americans today share in the activities of several of the largest, more cohesive national Arab-American organizations. These groups are the Midwest Federation of American Syrian Lebanese Clubs, which is primarily by charter a social and cultural organization; the Association of Arab American University Graduates, (A.A.U.G.), an organization of intellectuals -- writers, educators, physicians, lawyers, whose main function is that of educating their own people and the general public through research, writing, conferences, and continuous public relations on the problems of the Middle East; and third, the
National Association of Arab-Americans, a politically activistic group, which has gained a foothold in Washington policy and foreign affairs unavailable to Arab-Americans a few short years ago. Since the Lebanese crisis, another national group, the American Lebanese League, ALL, has also appeared on the scene. Its primary purpose is to address its energies toward the Lebanese problem.

In October of 1973, during the most recent of the Middle East wars, the Cleveland Council on Arab-American Relations, which had been meeting weekly, decided to structure their activities along a political base aligned with the philosophies of the National Arab American Association. They changed the name of the Council to the "Greater Cleveland Association of Arab-Americans." but made no decision at that time to affiliate with the national organization, preferring to retain self-determination and autonomy as a Cleveland organization. Following the first term of office of the organization, they reversed the original decision and affiliated with the National Association.
In April of 1976, the fourth national convention of the National Association of Arab-Americans was held in Cleveland, its social events hosted by Ambassadors from twenty Arab countries. Local political leaders and representatives from the White House and the Senate attended.

In 1976, Arab-Americans in Cleveland participated in the Bicentennial celebrations. Among their activities was an exhibit of Arabic culture put on display in the Cleveland Public Library.

Syrian and Lebanese artifacts and mementoes of the immigrations were exhibited in the Ethnographic Museum at the Western Reserve Historical Society by members of the Syrian American Club, a local organization.

At the Cleveland Plaza, The Union of Arab Women presented a table for the "Dining of Yesteryear" project of the Downtown Restoration Society. Wedad Mouhaissan Hasan, chairman of the women's group, called their display "My Grandmother's Table in Palestine" and created a tableau of an Arab house in the early 1900's. A low brass table was placed on oriental and sheep's wool rugs, upon which lay embroidered cushions to be used as seats. The table cloth was embroidered with the Jerusalem Cross motif, and in the center was set a tall vase of anemones, the "lilies of the field" of the New Testament. A brass coffee service from Damascus stood at one side, while on the other an Argeleh from Hebron rested on a table of inlaid woods.

Arab Americans were among the committee members who planned the Bicentennial Project of the Women's Committee of the Nationalities Services Center, the introduction of the Cleveland Ballet in its first professional
performance before a Cleveland audience in the Spring of 1976 at the Drury Theater of the Cleveland Playhouse.

On the two hundredth anniversary of our country's birth, Arab Americans in Cleveland found themselves to have been a part of at least a hundred years of American and Cleveland history.

From the first few arrivals in the 1870's, the Cleveland Arab American community has grown to around 20,000. The few families who huddled together around the coal stoves in winter and on the tenement porches in summer in the neighborhoods around Bolivar Road have spread out to all the corners of Cleveland and to the suburbs and townships surrounding it. There is no longer a Syrian-Lebanese neighborhood, and even the new arrivals, the Palestinians and Egyptians, do not feel the necessity of confining themselves within a close ethnic neighborhood community. Like other residents of the city, however, they tend to find homes not too distant from their places of work.

The first, second, and third generation of Syrian-Lebanese ancestry has moved rapidly from the inheritance of the family grocery store into all areas of professional endeavor. The former administration of the City of Cleveland included among its cabinet officers, Joseph Tegreene, a young man of Lebanese heritage; a Cleveland Woman of Syrian ancestry, Mary Rose Oaker, is at present representing her District in the House of Representatives; the Probate Court is served by a judge of Lebanese ancestry, Joseph Nahra, the suburb of Seven Hills until recently had a Lebanese American mayor, Richard Ganim. In the elections of 1979, a newcomer to politics, 27-year old Richard Anter, became Mayor of Fairview Park, Ohio.
More than thirty Cleveland physicians and dentists are of Arabic heritage, while Cleveland hospitals usually number between one hundred and one hundred and fifty Arabs among their residents and interns. A Cleveland nun, Sister Judith Ann Karam, of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, a pharmacist, has received a degree in Hospital Administration at Ohio State University and will assume an administrative position in the new Westlake-St. John Hospital Complex. There are numbers of nurses, educators, therapists, attorneys, and social workers of Arab ancestry in the ranks of those professionals contributing to the well-being of the city.

A former Clevelander, Dr. Donna Shalala now serves in the highest-ranking woman's position in HUD in Washington.

After a hundred years in Cleveland, Arab Americans can look back on the pain and loneliness of the first years of immigration; the closed society of the immigrant community; the years of the parallel existence of live and let live with the rest of Cleveland, and finally to the assimilation into the American mainstream as participants in the life of the entire community.

They remember the joy of rushing into the streets to laugh and to cry when the Armistice ended a war and gave America a victory. Their memory goes back too to the quiet gratitude they felt as they stood beside their children and grandchildren at the end of the Second World War. They remember the anguish of the Depression, the struggle to stay out of the breadlines, the embarrassment of working on the WPA, and the exquisite triumph of finally landing a job,
paying on the mortgage, or keeping the business from going under.

The names of the dead of World War II are still recounted among those who knew and loved them. The veterans of World War II still reminisce about reunions with brothers and cousins and Cleveland buddies in the campaigns of Europe, North Africa and the South Pacific.

The first elders are gone, and their children and even their grandchildren have moved into their places. The day of the strong man and the stronger woman who led the tiny community of unsophisticated immigrants belongs to a gently remembered past. There are those among the Arab-American community who no longer follow because of family, or name, or old loyalties, or "because we have to push one of our own ahead." That factor of survival is no longer necessary.

The history of the first hundred years is one that cannot be repeated by immigrations of the present or the future. It was an era in which the poor and the wretched escaped a backward and dominated society to reach out for new freedom and the right to choose.

The Arab World was asleep in those days of a hundred or more years ago, and its emigrants were like those children of innocence who walked in dream through a gateway of glory and promise. They were the trusting, the hopeful, the faithful, the lovers of America.

They were the believers. They worked with a pure joy, and they built with a passion to endure, and to find immortality. Their children were the new people, the Americans. Their American grandchildren are their immortality.