

UnStated: Narrating
War in Lebanon

SALAH D. HASSAN

THIS ESSAY CONSISTS OF THREE BEGINNINGS, THEN A DEFERRED READING OF A NOVEL. ONE BEGINNING, A THEORETICAL BEGINNING, reflects on the question implicit in my title: What is unstated in the state of Lebanon? Another beginning, a literary critical beginning, returns to the work of Kahlil Gibran, the most famous early-twentieth-century Arab North American writer. Gibran links modernist and postmodernist Arab North American writing and, in a historical parallel, connects the foundations of the Lebanese state under French colonial rule to its disintegration in the context of the civil war. A third beginning, a contextual beginning, evokes more recent events in Lebanon through a discussion of the July War of 2006, during which Israel bombed the country for over a month. These three points of departure, I suggest, are crucial to readings of contemporary Arab North American fiction, which is always conditioned by theories of the state, a post-Gibran literary sensibility, and the politics of the present. More specifically, I argue that Rawi Hage's representation of the civil war in Lebanon in *DeNiro's Game* negotiates the destruction of the Lebanese state through figures of the unstated, whose very existence questions more generally the state form as the preeminent site of political authority¹ and contributes to unstating the state.

At the semantic level, the unstated is that which cannot be spoken, the unutterable, the censored, or the repressed *énoncé*. In the context of Lebanon, the unstated refers not merely to the grotesque brutalities of war, which have been documented in graphic detail by journalists, photographers, and TV crews and also portrayed more subtly by writers, such as Jean Genet. A uniquely poetic example of the urge to state the wretchedness of Lebanon is Genet's "Quatre heures à Chatila," a description of the scene in the Shatilla refugee camp following the 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians by the Phalangist militia while the occupying Israeli army looked on. The unstated is perhaps latent in these various forms of testimony, whose words satisfy a desire to hear and, if possible, feel the violence of war. But for those who care to know, the intimacies of violence that marked Lebanon in the 1970s

SALAH D. HASSAN, an associate professor in the Department of English at Michigan State University, has published articles in *Social Text*, *New Formations*, *Socialism and Democracy*, *Radical History Review*, *Research in African Literatures*, and *Middle East Report*. Recently he coedited (with Marcy Newman) a special issue of *MELUS* on Arab American literature. The associate editor of *CR: The New Centennial Review*, he has edited special issues of the journal under the titles *The Origins of Postmodern Cuba*, *Terror Wars*, and *Cultures of Occupation*. He is completing a book tentatively to be titled *Palestine in Theory*.

and 1980s exist in an abundance of images and words. It is not so much that the violence, violations, and victimizations in Lebanon are unstated as that the many statements have had little effect; they are unheard, muffled in the chambers of power politics and world affairs, where effective statements must be backed by force, a force that Lebanon does not possess.

The unstated also refers to a condition of a state that is no longer a state, a state that has little or no sovereignty, a state that is bereft of the means to uphold or impose the rule of law in its territory or at its borders through the mechanisms of force. In contrast with its roguish neighbors Israel and Syria and that more distant rogue state, the United States,² which use force in the Middle East to establish their authority, Lebanon, the unstated state, has no strength and no authority. A consequence of the unstated state is the stateless subject: migrants, refugees, and exiles. It is particularly through the refugee that one encounters a significant alternative to the nation-state as the model for structuring global political order and defining subjectivity in general. Giorgio Agamben makes the following comment in this regard:

It is also the case that, given the by now unstoppable decline of the nation-state and the general corrosion of traditional political-juridical categories, the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today—at least until the process of dissolution of the nation-state and of its sovereignty has achieved full completion—the forms and limits of a coming political community. (16)

For Agamben, the refugee stands in opposition to the citizen of the nation-state and represents the figure of an unstated future, or a future without territorialized nation-states.

The dissolution of the state and of its sovereignty poses a familiar problem—both tragic and liberating—in Lebanon. Despite its de jure existence, Lebanon has always existed

de facto as an unstated state, a state without sovereignty and always in the process of dissolution. Unlike Palestine, which is a nonstate, Lebanon possesses all the institutional attributes of a state and has produced an effective national identity defined in terms of territory. But the governing bodies of Lebanon are void of the essential content of sovereignty, which is constitutive of a state, and its citizenry is fractured along sectarian lines. The Lebanese state can neither defend its territory nor govern its citizens. It has been unstated because it is subject to the authority of rogues within its borders, or to a “*voyou-crac*,” as Jacques Derrida has described it: “[I]f the *voyou-crac* represents a sort of competing power, a challenge to the power of the state, a criminal and transgressive countersovereignty, we have here all the makings of a counterconcept of sovereignty” (67–68). He goes on to observe, “The *voyou* can also be one of those ‘great criminals [grosse Verbrecher]’ who . . . fascinates because he defies the state, that is, the institution that, in representing the law, secures and maintains for itself a monopoly on violence” (68). Indeed, it is the work of the members of competing *voyou-cracs* in Lebanon that have in part unstated the state, even as they often claim to operate in the service of restoring the state, like so many of the Lebanese politicians whose power and authority have been historically linked to rival militias.

While Agamben’s claim that in the figure of the refugee one can begin to glimpse an alternative future to today’s nation-state system, Derrida’s elaboration of the rogue as the “counterconcept of sovereignty” stands differently in opposition to the state. The refugee serves as a metaphor of the community to come following the demise of the nation-state; the rogue signifies those historic forces associated with a violence that is beyond the authority of the state. The refugee marks the end of the state’s sovereignty; the rogue mirrors the violence of the state. In *DeNiro’s Game*, these two figures—refugee and rogue—come

together in the character of Bassam, who embodies the unstated subject loose in the world and the Romantic antiheroic outlaw.

In the hundred-year period from the first significant wave of Arab migration to the Americas in the 1890s to the formal end of the Lebanese Civil War in the 1990s, Lebanon passed from an Ottoman territory within the Arab provinces to a French colony to a nominally independent state. During those hundred years, Lebanon emerged simultaneously as a place of sanctuary for many refugees in the region, notably for Armenians in the first half of the century and for Palestinians in the second half, and as a place from which many fled into exile. Gibran was among those early migrants, and his life and career as a writer in the United States parallels the emergence of Lebanon as a colonial state. When Gibran immigrated to the United States in 1895, the state of Lebanon did not exist; its modern beginning is as an unstated territory. He left a village in Ottoman-ruled Syria. By the time of his death in New York in 1931, the colonial state of Lebanon had been established through the collusion of French and British foreign-service officials. In the intervening years, he established a significant United States readership, especially based on the publication of *The Madman* in 1918 and *The Prophet* in 1923. The appeal of books like *The Prophet* in the United States lies no doubt in its transcendentalist philosophy, not unconnected to the nineteenth-century American tradition of letters. Gibran's writing in English relies on rather simple literary tropes of the human condition, often inflected with orientalist references. That said, there is a political complexity to Gibran's oeuvre that is generally overlooked but can be identified in oblique references to the situation in the Arab East after World War I. While residing in the United States, Gibran maintained a strong attachment to the region of Lebanon, and some of his texts indicate an ambivalence about its redefinition in the period between 1921 and 1931 as a distinct national territory,

separated from Syria, under a stubborn French colonial administration.

As with so many formerly colonized lands, partition is the founding act of violence that defined the political and territorial limits of Lebanon. Much of the conflict that has conditioned Lebanon's history since its independence can be traced first to the separation from Syria and then to the promotion of postindependence sectarian politics by the French, which has resulted in further internal splintering of the nation-state in the postcolonial period. Gibran described the dichotomy of colonial Lebanon in a 1920s prose poem titled "You Have Your Lebanon and I Have My Lebanon": "What will remain of your Lebanon after a century? Tell me! Except bragging, lying and stupidity? Do you expect the ages to keep in its memory the traces of deceit and cheating and hypocrisy? Do you think the atmosphere will preserve in its pockets the shadows of death and the stench of graves?" "Your Lebanon and its people" refers to a country that is subject to European culture, "whose souls were born in the hospitals of the West." In contrast, Gibran's Lebanon is a pastoral fantasy, noble in its attachment to land: "a flock of birds fluttering in the early morning as shepherds lead their sheep into the meadow." In the prose poem, the critique of colonial Lebanon gives way to this Romantic vision of the nation premised on the ideal of a communion between the people and the land, which includes the return of the migrant. The poem's politics tend to be oriented toward an unchanging past, characterized predominantly by a rural existence free from the corruptions of colonial domination.

A later poem titled "Pity the Nation," which is included in *The Garden of the Prophet*, the sequel to *The Prophet*, suggests a more prescient political sensibility about conditions in the Arab world. The poem has the trademark spiritualism of Gibran's work, opening with this line: "[P]ity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion," but its teleology

is political. The final line of the poem speaks directly of the fracturing of the body politic and the rise of micronationalisms: "Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation." Robert Fisk, the British journalist who has covered the Middle East for the last twenty-five years, borrowed the poem's title for his book on Lebanon. Fisk's *Pity the Nation* is a series of uncompromising reports that bears witness to the wars that wrecked Lebanon between 1975 and 1989. While much of his narrative concerns the sectarian civil war during those years, it is cast in a broader context to expose the regional and international forces that contributed to "the abduction of Lebanon." In the epilogue to his book, Fisk alludes to Gibran's "two Lebanons" and "the nation divided in fragments," contrasting European unification in the late 1980s with the continuing chaos across the Middle East: "While Europe anticipated a new unity, Lebanon had acquired two rival governments, one led by a Christian general, the other by a Sunni prime minister. Two Lebanons thus surfaced, a Christian rump state controlled by half the country's army and a powerless Muslim nation dependent upon Syria" (629). The image of Lebanon presented in his book is a state at war with itself but also vulnerable to the wars visited upon it by powerful neighbors, namely Israel and Syria. If Gibran predicted the emergence of two Lebanons, Fisk projects this idea across the history of the French colonial state and into the period of the postcolonial state of the 1980s.

Gibran is important not only because he provides an understanding of Lebanon's dualities but also because today's literary critics, writers, and cultural historians have positioned him, more than any other modern Arab writer, at the origin of Arab North American literature. It is in connection with this position that Munir Akash and Khaled Mattawa titled their anthology of Arab American writing *Post Gibran*. Even though the works contained in the anthology suggest

a movement beyond the preoccupations of Gibran, the collection confirms the continuing influence of Gibran in the defining of an Arab North American literary project. For example, in her contribution to the collection of mostly creative writing, Lisa Suhair Majaj's essay "New Directions: Arab American Writing at Century's End" clearly identifies Gibran as the primary source of a tradition:

Arab-American literature has gone through many shifts since the early decades of the twentieth-century when Khalil Gibran and other *Mahjar*, or émigré, writers in New York formed the *Ar-Rabitah*, the Writers Guild, and began to publish poetry and prose that changed the face of Arabic literature even as it initiated a century of Arab-American literary endeavors. (67)

This type of invocation of Gibran is an almost unavoidable feature of criticism on Arab North American literature. Even as Majaj's essay and the broader project of the *Post Gibran* anthology seek to emphasize the contemporary break with Gibran's legacy, they reassert it in the editors' definition of Arab American literature, which is at pains to distance itself from Gibran's stylistics.

For example, in their brief introduction, the editors associate Gibran's significance not with the quality of his poetry, which they dismiss in favor of his ability to connect to an Arab literary tradition. They boldly assert, "Khalil Gibran found his way into the American heart, not because he was a great poet, but because he strove to manifest positive aspects in our traditional writing" (xii). It is unlikely that Gibran's United States readership was primarily attracted by his ability to tap into some form of essential Arabness concealed in a tradition of writing. Nevertheless, by making this claim, the editors want to distance themselves from the affected stylistics of much of his work and at the same time retain him as a crucial figure linking literature in Arabic to Arab North American writ-

ing. They underscore a continuity established not through a particular style of writing but rather in the relation to Arab literature. Consequently, what comes to define the category of Arab North American literature is an intertextuality between writing in English by Arabs and Arabic literature. In other words, Arab North American literature is not merely works written in English by Arabs or authors of Arab descent residing in the United States or Canada; it must give expression to an ostensible Arab literary tradition. This point explains in part why the editors of *Post Gibran* have included in the collection translated works by Arab writers, such as Mahmoud Darwish and Tawfiq al-Hakim. But what is the status of those literary works by Arabs and about Arabs in English, like Rabih Alameddine's 1998 novel *KoolAids* or Hage's *DeNiro's Game*, that do not "manifest positive aspects in our traditional writing" and are obviously influenced by French or North American literature? These post-Gibran narratives break resolutely with both stylistics and the Arab national politics that have come to be associated with Khalil Gibran's life and work.

One immediately relevant example of the historic crisis in the region is the 2006 July War, confirming once again that Lebanon remains unstated. The initial political effect of Israel's month-long bombing of the country, ostensibly motivated by Hizbollah's cross-border attacks, was an increase in the already rising popularity of Hizbollah, which projected itself as victorious in forcing Israel's military retreat to the international border. But the strength of Hizbollah—whether part of the state or a *voyou-crazy* that has usurped the state—is proportionate to the weakness of the Lebanese state and its fundamental inability to uphold the rule of law and secure its borders. The Israeli destruction of Lebanon was justified in Israel on the grounds that Hizbollah held Lebanon captive. The July War reaffirmed what has long been the case: an unstated Lebanon exists in the limited and

liminal political space between foreign military powers (France, Syria, Iran, the United States, Israel) and national militias (the Phalangists, Lebanese Forces, Progressive Socialist Party–Druze, Hizbollah).

In fact, at least since the beginning of the civil war in the 1970s, but perhaps going back to the 1950s, after the French colonial period ended and the United States invaded the country, militias in Lebanon have had ties to foreign powers, and the national territory of Lebanon has served as an ungoverned battlefield in regional wars that are played out in the guise of sectarian conflicts or border disputes. Journalists as different as Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* and Lawrence F. Kaplan in the *New Republic* similarly argued, as did so many others in the summer of 2006, that the Israel-Hizbollah war was, in the words of Hersh, "the mirror image of what the United States has been planning for Iran" or, according to Kaplan, "a classic case of great-power brinkmanship . . . pitting the United States against Iran." The United States–Israeli policy is therefore premised on the following analogy: while the United States considers Iran a rogue state that is preventing democratic change in the region, Israel considers Hizbollah a rogue group that undermines the democratic character of the Lebanese state. Just as the United States justifies a future attack on Iran to promote democracy in the Middle East, Israel justifies the 2006 assault on Lebanon to liberate the state from Hizbollah. The Israelis tested in Lebanon what the United States dreams of doing in Iran. The failure of Israel to destroy Hizbollah militarily and politically may have provided an important strategic lesson for the Bush administration as it contemplated an attack on Iran. Needless to say, the Israeli bombing of the country indicates that the present state of Lebanon remains uncertain as the specter of past wars haunts the Lebanon of the future.

From the early 1990s to 2006, when the reconstruction of Lebanon progressed under the patronage of then Prime Minister Rafik

Hariri, several Arab North American literary works were published that address the wars of the 1970s and 1980s. These English- and French-language texts are not merely historical narratives but also trouble widespread myths about Lebanon, held as much by the Lebanese outside the country as by others. Central to these depictions of Lebanon's past is the problematic of national belonging and the fracturing of national bonds that are in part represented by the protagonists' attempts to escape the violence that marks the country's contemporary history. Flights into exile constitute new beginnings liberated from the political nightmare of an unstated state. Even as exile, or statelessness, is presented as a potentially emancipatory condition, the texts themselves—written in exile—return incessantly to the context of an unstated Lebanon, providing a backstory to a post-civil-war Lebanon.

A longer version of this essay would consider the production of several North American texts as well as works in Arabic that similarly look back across the decades of civil war and Israeli occupation, but space allows me only to focus on one narrative example to illustrate the representation of the unstated in connection with Lebanon. I discuss the unstated and statelessness through a brief reading of *DeNiro's Game*, a novel by the Canadian writer Rawi Hage. At the very moment in 2006 when Lebanon tragically again became front-page news in North America, displacing for a month the other bloody conflicts taking place in Iraq and Palestine, *DeNiro's Game* appeared in Canada. The book, which relates the experiences of Bassam and George, two young men in East Beirut during the Israeli invasion of 1982, immediately attracted attention in Canada and was short-listed for the prestigious Giller Prize and the Governor-General's Award.

The book's initial success may in part be due to interest in Lebanon during the summer of 2006, but the novel, not quite political thriller, not quite postmodern pastiche, is more than just a reflection on Lebanon's past

or a symptom of its own historical moment. To be sure, *DeNiro's Game* is an attempt to come to terms with the absurdity of the civil war, but it also instantiates more generally the twin problematics of the unstated and statelessness. Bassam, the narrator, begins his story by noting, "Ten thousand bombs had landed." He immediately repeats the observation, locating himself in the scene: "Ten thousand bombs had landed on Beirut, that crowded city, and I was on a blue sofa covered with white sheets to protect it from dust and dirty feet. It is time to leave, I was thinking to myself" (11). The Israeli bombing of the city occasions the thought of leaving; the violation of the state's sovereignty produces a desire to enter a condition of statelessness.

In the first two parts of the book, Bassam schemes and steals to get the money he needs to buy passage out of Beirut, fantasizing about an escape to Rome. Meanwhile, George, whose nickname is DeNiro, takes pleasure in the unstatedness of a Lebanon divided along sectarian lines:

We sat in George's living room on an old couch between echoing walls. We whispered conspiracies, exchanged money, drank beer, rolled hash in soft white paper, and I praised Roma.

Roma? George said. Go to America. Roma, there is no future. Yeah it is pretty, but America is better.

How about you? I said. Are you going or staying?

I am staying. I like it here. (34)

The contrast between the two friends is accentuated by the difference between Roma and America, the pretty and the better. "Better" here is associated with the future; "pretty" is a dead end. These contrasting positions are politicized further as each friend understands differently the forces at work to undermine the sovereignty of Lebanon. Even as Israel drops ten thousand bombs on the city, George sees the violation of the state in terms

of foreign Arabs: “They are coming from all over the world to fight us, Bassam, here in our land. Palestinians, Somalis, and Syrians—everyone has a claim on this land, right?” (128). From George’s perspective, which increasingly comes under the influence of the Christian right-wing militia leader Abou Nahra, Lebanon is unstated by these foreign Arab elements, associated in the novel with the leftist forces in West Beirut. Despite the bonds between the two friends, for Bassam the state is undermined by the Israeli assault:

Israeli soldiers entered our land, splitting rivers and olive trees. Vatron and I were reading the newspaper on the edge of the sidewalk. The headlines blared: *The Jews are in the south! The Syrians have pulled back! The Muqawamah [resistance] is getting ready! The Christian forces are allying themselves with the invaders!* (144)

These positions underscore an ideological cleavage in Lebanon, which expresses another version of its twoness. Lebanon is central to the emergence of a new imperial order that locates the country in an alliance with the United States (and Israel); at the same time, it is crucial to the building of an anti-imperialist, pan-Arabist, or pan-Islamist front.

Despite the differences, what holds the two friends together, beyond their childhood, is a shared thuggishness. As they ride together on George’s motorcycle through the streets “where bombs fell” (12), Bassam idealizes their position as outlaws: “War is for thugs. Motorcycles are also for thugs, and for longhaired teenagers like us, with guns under our bellies, and stolen gas in our tanks, and no particular place to go” (13). The irony of course is that Bassam wants to escape the war-torn city that is governed by thugs like George, who kill and torture; Bassam’s thuggishness, as with perhaps all thuggishness, is a romantic self-image that collapses lawlessness and freedom.³ Conversely, George’s thuggishness is identified with the force of the militia, which is the law in East Beirut. Whereas George increases his

involvement with the militia, a *voyou-cracy* led by Al-Rayess, “the highest commander of the Christian Lebanese forces [who] had been assassinated” (167), Bassam is detained and tortured by this very militia. Part 2 of the novel concludes with George and Bassam together in a car parked under a bridge. After confessing to Bassam that he participated in the massacre of Palestinians in the Shatilla refugee camp, George affirms, “We always killed, Bassam . . . We always killed. The man who killed Al-Rayess, that man confessed. He mentioned your name. You gave him the plan for the foundation. You killed Al-Rayess” (179). Bassam is tried and convicted in absentia by the Christian militia, assuming the powers of the state, and George is sent to bring him in for execution; but George gives him a way out, which Bassam takes and flees to Paris.

The third and final part of the book is set in Paris, where Bassam’s stateless existence defines his status as a rogue in France. At this point, Bassam comes to represent the illegal migrant, the target of vigilante racist attacks and criminalized by the French state. His presence in France exposes the limits of the democratic state. Derrida writes:

[Democracy] has wanted, on the one hand, to welcome only men, and on the condition that they be citizens, brothers, and compeers [*semblables*], excluding all others, in particular bad citizens, rogues, noncitizens, and all sorts of unlike and unrecognizable others, and, on the other hand, . . . it has wanted to open itself up, to offer hospitality, to all those excluded. (63)

Bassam takes on the persona of the absolute outsider. In a rather obvious and unfortunate reference, he comes to identify with Meursault, the antihero of Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger*. He wanders aimlessly the streets of Paris, carries a gun, beats men, and smashes car windshields. As he becomes entangled in a romance and political intrigue involving Rhea, George’s half sister—they had the same father—he begins to imagine himself as the

officer in a revolutionary army at war with aristocrats: “Everyone here affected a nonchalant air of importance, a kind of modern pseudo-aristocratic persona. If only I had my gun, I thought sadly, I would shoot them on the steps of their palaces” (249). In his condition of statelessness, his historical imagination takes over as he fantasizes about seizing the state from the elites. In this fantasy, the stateless subject, the illegal immigrant, the political refugee, the outsider is the bringer of a democracy to come, inaugurated by a revolutionary act, which effaces the differences between the citizens and the unstated.

To conclude, I return to Gibran’s two Lebanons. “Your Lebanon,” the colonial Lebanon of the 1920s, associated with “the shadows of death and the stench of graves,” finds a post-colonial manifestation in the massacre at Sabra and Shatilla and its fictional figuration in George, who described the scene to Bassam:

We killed! People were shot at random, entire families killed at dinner tables. Cadavers in their night clothes, throats slit; axes used, hands separated from bodies, women cut in half. The Israelis surrounded the camps. And then the Israeli lieutenant named Roly . . . sent a message to the camp committee to have all our men bring in their weapons to the stadium. We told him that we do not take orders from him. We told him that orders came from Abou Nahra, and that the Israeli high command knew about it. We moved farther in, and Israeli aircraft dropped 81-millimeter illumination flares. The whole area was lit up; it was like being in a Hollywood movie. (175)

But if George embodies the Lebanon of the shadows of death, Bassam can hardly be made to represent the poet’s Lebanon, that “flock of birds fluttering in the early morning as shepherds lead their sheep into the meadow.” The people of Gibran’s Lebanon are noble, victorious, loved, and respected: “They are those who migrate with nothing but courage in their hearts and strength in their arms but

who return with wealth in their hands and a wreath of glory upon their heads. They are the victorious wherever they go and loved and respected wherever they settle” (“You Have”). Bassam is the antiheroic version of Gibran’s migrant Lebanese, who roguishly turns his back on history and embraces the figure of the refugee; he harbors no thought of return and no desire to settle. In this novel, statelessness offers a form of freedom, the other side of an unstated Lebanon, which is torn apart by forces that seek to establish their authority over a state bereft of sovereignty. Post-Gibran fiction, to employ that useful concept coined by Akash and Mattawa, at least in the example of *DeNiro’s Game*, rejects the model of the state, its systems of laws and its networks of power, and embraces the possibilities of a world of unstated subjects.

NOTES

1. In the opening move of *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt resists particular definitions of the state and proposes the following open-ended conceptualization: “In a literal sense and in its historical appearance the state is a specific entity of a people. Vis-à-vis many conceivable kinds of entities, it is the decisive case of ultimate authority. More need not be said at the moment” (19–20).

2. See Chomsky for the different ways that these states can be understood to be rogues.

3. *Thug* is one term listed by Derrida as synonymous with *voyou*: “big man, bad boy, player, hence something of a seducer . . . rascal, hellion, good-for-nothing, ruffian, villain, crook, thug, gangster, shyster . . . scoundrel, miscreant, hoodlum, hooligan, *frappe* . . . ; one would also say today *banger* [*loulou*], *gangbanger* [*loubard*], sometimes even outside the inner city, in the suburbs, the suburban punk [*loubard des banlieues*]” (66).

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