

# Ahmad Beydoun and the Shi'ite Lebanese Town of Bint Jubail.

## Interview with Ahmad Beydoun

**Tomás Alcoverro.** *La Vanguardia* journalist and correspondent in Lebanon

Ahmad Beydoun, a lecturer at the Lebanese University, is the author of *Le Liban. Itinéraire dans une guerre incivile*.<sup>1</sup> In one chapter, he recounts the atmosphere in the southern towns in the summer of 1976 during a war which shocked the world. “Daily life in times of civil war,” he writes, “produces solitude. War snatches away from night time its capacity for generating a merry atmosphere, chance encounters and stimulating exchanges... War did not succeed in drawing together *za'ims* Musa Sadr and Kamil El Assad. This separation placed the issue of Shi'ite fragmentation between the dream of being integrated into the state and community crystallisation or absorption.” Once again, the Cedar Country confronts the temptations of its labyrinthine identities.

The dedication in his book *Identité confessionnelle et temps social chez les historiens libanais contemporains*<sup>2</sup> is revelatory and beautiful: “To Bint Jubail, my town, anxious after three generations to find where it is.” Ahmad Beydoun, one of the greatest Lebanese historians and sociologists, published this work in 1984, two years after the big Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This dedication which exhibits literary flair – the author, in addition to developing the social sciences, is also a word artist and has written a book of poems and various works on linguistic and cultural themes – pursues this quest, at times an anxious one, for national identity. Bint Jubail, in the South of Lebanon, only four kilometres from the Israeli border, became one of the most symbolic

battlefields of the latest war in the summer of 2007 between the radical Hezbollah Shi'ite organisation and soldiers from the Jewish army. His house, and four other houses belonging to his sisters, suffered severe damages during the fierce fighting. For decades, the South of Lebanon has been a region exposed to all manner of regional conflict and its population has also felt distant from and held in contempt by the Beirut governments.

**Tomás Alcoverro:** What is your relationship with the Lebanese State?

**Ahmad Beydoun:** Lebanon was declared an independent state by decree of the French ruling authorities. It was composed around a

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1. Beirut, CERMO, 1993.

2. Beirut, Université Libanaise, 1984.



Ahmad Beydoun (left) meets Tomás Alcoverro (right).

central nucleus that was the mountain inhabited by Christians and Druze. In 1920, it was extended to include an exit to the Mediterranean and the Bekaa Valley agricultural area. One of the added regions was the Djebel Amel, which was the name of the area in the South made up mostly of Shi'ite Muslims which, at the beginning, did not have many motives for accepting this new state because it traded more with Palestine and Syria than Beirut. It was with considerable difficulty that it assumed its new Lebanese identity.

**T.A.:** This is an important point that sheds light on relations between Shi'ites and the Beirut authorities and influential, neighbouring Syria.

**A.B.:** Obviously. We have to bear in mind two key facts. The French mandate recognized Shi'ite rites, the authority of its religious tribunals that had been disregarded during the dominion of the Ottoman Empire. This decision aroused a certain interest within the Shi'ite population in the new Lebanese legal and political organisation. In the end, they believed that it was better to belong to a state made up of minorities than to integrate into a large state like Syria, in which they would always be submerged in a Sunni Muslim majority. In addition, Syria having accepted the French condition imposed for obtaining independence to not question Lebanese borders, they felt that Syria was abandoning them. 1936 was crucial for its integration into the new Lebanon.

**T.A.:** Yes, but to come back to your highly expressive dedication, Bint Jubail, for nearly half a century after this date, still did not know to which country it belonged...

**A.B.:** In 1982, Bint Jubail, the South of Lebanon, was occupied for a second time by Israel. We have to bear in mind the first occupation of 1978. The South was cut off from the rest of the country. Its inhabitants had the impression that everyone had abandoned them. The other regions did not show concern for their fate. National sentiment, which had moved forward with such difficulty through the traumatic blows dealt by Palestine, as well as Nasser and Baas' Pan-Arabist ideological tendencies, influenced Djebel Amel's situation.

**T.A.:** Why is it that, for so many years, this southern region has been such an open playing field for Palestinian guerrilla warfare, secular militia groups or Islamic ones such as Hezbollah?

**A.B.:** It is due to weakness in the state and the UN's incompetence in ensuring the fulfilment of the requirements of the Security Council Resolution 425 on the Israeli evacuation, which was only implemented six years ago after persistent armed resistance. This gap has been exploited by Hezbollah together with its fighters and social action policy. A part of the population felt that it was necessary to fight and they threw themselves into the arms of Syria and Iran, who made themselves available to help owing to their own interests in playing a role in the regional conflict.

**T.A.:** Does Hezbollah embody the Shi'ite community?

**A.B.:** In Europe, there is a tendency to simplify matters, as we do frequently ourselves. As

for the Shi'ites, there is real diversity in terms of attitudes. For example, in what happened last summer when its leadership embarked on such an adventure. But its political expression remains afflicted by circumstances, by the war situation, by the strength of the information and propaganda media that Hezbollah and Amal have at their disposal. There are critical figures, such as Sayed Ali Amin, the Mufti of Tiro and Djebel Amel, who oppose Hezbollah policy. But their voice has little resonance. I too, as an intellectual, have only my words to rely on.

**T.A.:** As an independent Arab historian, how would you judge the Europeans' perception of that which is called terrorism?

**A.B.:** Since the events of 9/11, a more hard-line theory has been established in relation to the phenomenon called "terrorist"; although this is more a notion than a real concept. A notion that hampers, for example, explaining terrorism in the United States, as its explanation is interpreted as its assimilation. It is obvious that, to get to know a phenomenon, one has to study it. Even with emotions being what they are, one cannot abdicate from the ability to understand. One tends to demonise and build up the terrorist phenomenon to reach extraordinary proportions. It is terrible to bring the West into conflict with massive Muslim communities. However, one has to ask why the terrorist phenomenon emerged at this time. Why Shi'ites today are so different from those who lived 30 years ago? In Lebanon, as I said before, motives for this change have been the Israeli occupation, abandonment by the state, international inefficiency, and opportune offers of help from Iran and Syria...

**T.A.:** Do you think that Lebanon is a victim of internationalisation?

**A.B.:** I think that internationalisation occurs from pre-existing conditions. Relations between Sunnis with Saudi Arabia and Shi'ites with Iran were already well established. The regional situation has helped to aggravate these clashes. After 15 years of pragmatic convergence, the development of relations between the United States and Syria has led to this serious situation. There are two sides to the conflict: the Arab world or the East, and the West. I think that Lebanese interests cannot simply be defined as a geographical issue, since there are regional geostrategic issues that surpass the territory of southern Lebanon, such as Israel, or oil. The Syrians controlled Lebanon during three lustrums and we enjoyed a period of relative peace, but its State and society were undermined, and it was no longer possible to continue in this state of affairs.

**T.A.:** Yes, but I am referring to the westernisation of Lebanon, to the great influence exerted over recent months by the United States, France and the European Union, which above all support Fuad Siniora's government, ignore President Emil Lahud, and keep their distance from Hezbollah and its allies...

**A.B.:** The rivalry could be harmful for Lebanon, but also it could be harmful to suffer international abandonment and indifference. Lebanon, between the East and the West, cannot be handed over to one single part.

In Bint Jubail, despite promises of help from the Qatar emirate and Hezbollah, the town has not been rebuilt and its inhabitants have still not returned. Neither has Ahmad Beydoun been able to go back to his family home.