

“Please Tell Your People We’re Not Terrorists”

All western people have bad ideas about us; they have a phobia when they come here. When they go to areas where Hezbollah is present or when they enter a Palestinian camp they think they’re going to a warzone, that people will kidnap or kill them. They’re afraid that if they say hi to someone, they’ll kill them. [But] we’re not terrorists; our religion is peaceful. Our prophet asked us to accept all people; whether they are Muslim or Christian or Jewish, there is no problem. [...] I invited you to show that I am in Hezbollah and I am a normal man, I talk with you freely and I am helping you, so you can show people the correct idea about Islam, about Hezbollah; we’re defending our dignity, our land, this is our right. Let all people understand our idea.

[local Hezbollah representative, author’s interview 17 July 2013]

One of the most amazing experiences throughout my research into local governance in Palestinian gatherings in South Lebanon has been the warm welcome I received. People in Shabriha were perhaps puzzled about the nature of the research I am doing (and doubtful about its utility), yet in all cases they have welcomed me with curiosity, respect and kindness. Wherever I went I was met with cries of *ahlan wa sahlán* (welcome) and *fouti, meile* (enter, come in). Some people told me many people in South Lebanon have become wary about strangers, put off by too many Israeli informers and spies posing as journalists and researchers (or less spectacularly: researchers draining them of information and never once getting back to them after they got what they needed). Someone pointed out to me that “This society is scared of foreigners. They will be asking about you: ‘who is she? What does she want? Why has she left her country to be here?’ People here first of all think of security.” Mostly, however, people found great pride in showing me their famed Arab/Bedouin/Islamic hospitality. They praised my actually living among them, stressing that “there’s bread and salt between us now,” which with them meant that after having shared their meals and having sat in their houses, I could now be trusted. In our farewells, someone even gave me the biggest (although obviously false) compliment imaginable by saying that I now knew more about Shabriha than most people living there.

People in Shabriha, however, have not just approached me as a likeable if curious individual, but also – and often quite explicitly – as a messenger to ‘the West.’ Throughout my four-month period in Shabriha, it has struck me how aware people were of their self-professed bad reputation in Europe and how eager they were to correct this image. This concern manifested itself through harmless jokes: when a Hezbollah member had driven me home after having invited me to share the Ramadan breaking-the-fast *iftar* meal with his family, he told me that I could breathe again now that I had not been kidnapped. It was also apparent in respondents’ attitudes: after having missed a previous appointment with me, someone told my interpreter he was very worried what ‘the foreigner’ would think of him now. It was also the explicit subject of many conversations I had, as testified in the opening quote to this entry.

In general, I have noted a duality in people’s constant comparing ‘the West’ and ‘the Middle East.’ When it comes to social life, people in Shabriha (in many cases also reflecting experiences from relatives that migrated to European countries) often lamented what they

called the ‘coldness’ of Western society, where they feel people do not care about family and all spontaneity and genuineness had left social interaction, and prided the generosity and warmth of their own culture. Regarding political life, however, I have found both Palestinians and Lebanese in Lebanon tremendously outspoken in their rejection of what they called the corruption, injustice and ineffectiveness of most Arab governing. At the same time people spoke with admiration about what they saw as the ordered, just and efficient rule of European countries (albeit with the exception of foreign politics). This contrast was often captured in the juxtaposing of the key notions *fawda* (chaos) and *nizam* (system) to characterize the East and West respectively. On many occasions, people also seemed to confirm the existing truism that societies in the Middle East are communal or collective while those in Europe are individualist. However, this distinction, overly simplistic anyway, relates mostly to the social realm. Concerning the political realm the tables might very well be turned, as evidenced in people’s complaints about the governance of public space; about how “everyone here is willing to spend thousands of dollars on their home, but no one can spare a monthly ten dollar fee to maintain infrastructure” and “everyone is obsessed about cleaning their own veranda, but no one thinks twice about dumping waste right next to it on the street.”

While culture and politics provided interesting food for discussion and conversation, it was religion that took center stage in people’s concerns about Western misinterpretation of the Middle East. People were worried about, and in many cases hurt by, what they regarded as Europeans’ blatant misconceptions of Islam. People often tried to convince me that many of the good things to be found in their society were actually good because of religion, citing the above described warm welcome as the most obvious example and professing “helping the stranger and the guest” as a core principle of Islam. My interpreter (who helped me interpret so much more than just language) on many occasions explained to me that what Europeans feared or dislike in Islam – issues usually related to gender or politics – often were cultural traits that have nothing to do with Islam as professed in the Quran. For her and many others problems regarding (mal)treatment of women and tribal vendettas do not stem from Muslim people following Islam, but rather from *not* following it. Someone noted “no one here is a real Muslim, it’s all just Bedouin traditions.” My observation that members and sympathizers of Hezbollah (the Arabic name means ‘party of God’) often proved the most helpful, polite and professional respondents I encountered, she used to prove her point: “They’re strict with religion, but the religion itself isn’t strict! So they’re not strict.” Above all, people, whether Lebanese or Palestinian, Shia or Sunni, went to great lengths to dissociate their religion from the terrorism discourse that has become so omnipresent in Western thinking and explained to me how much of the Islam as portrayed in western media was not ‘their’ Islam at all:

And the Palestinian logic, the Palestinian mind, the Palestinian education are all against everything terrorist. There are those who are terrorist and strict; they have bad ideas about religion, they say they are religious but they don’t have any relation with the Islamic religion. You know the very strict forces in the region here, like the Nusra Front and Al Qaeda? These encourage the problems between the sects in Islam. We’re against the very strict in the Sunni as well as [in] the Shia sect, we have to be in the middle. Islam asks us to be peaceful and to live with our neighbors regardless of their religion. We are the religion of peace; we don’t have any problem with any religion, so how can these strict groups reject other groups? This is not Islam.

Shabrihans, again informed by their family in Europe, told me an important problem is that the salafist school is becoming the dominant branch of Islam in Europe which gives Europeans an “unrepresentative representative” of Islam. More people than I expected also insisted on countering the ever-growing Sunni-Shia divide, dismissing it as political fabrications that do not reflect daily life where, in Shabriha at least, Sunni and Shia work and sometimes even socialize together. My interpreter, for instance, told me her brother “in general didn’t like the Shia,” while at the same time, most of his friends were Shia.

How deep the urge to convince outsiders of their good intentions is rooted, became clear to me to me when two different Osama’s – Osama being a perfectly ordinary Arabic name – introduced themselves to me as “I’m Osama, but not Bin Laden.” Moreover, the hurt and exasperation people in Shabriha expressed about their entire complex, diverse and changing society being captured under the demonizing notion of terrorism was not limited to religion. In the case of Palestinians, it is also, inevitably, linked to the ‘Palestinian cause,’ the many misgivings about which are even more frustrating, humiliating and painful for the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon than any misrepresentation of Islam can ever be. People without fail told me they “weren’t against the Jews, but against the Zionists;” that they did not want to “drive anyone into the sea,” but just wanted to have a country as well; that they did not like violence but that logic instigated that “continuing on a road that has only known failure [i.e. negotiation with Israel] for decades” could rationally not be expected to help them much.

The disappointment about being labeled terrorist when only pursuing a righteous cause is not limited to the Palestinians, moreover. While another case completely (in terms of both political ethics and international law), I found a similar emotion among Hezbollah officials at what was seen as deliberate misrepresentation in the form of the blacklisting of (the military wing of) their movement. I was particularly struck by the extent to which these people actually cared about what European governments and people thought about them. Perhaps having expected that organizations like Hezbollah could not care less about their reputation in the West, I found the opposite in the response of the local Hezbollah member with which I had met and who felt personally wronged by the ban. He cynically warned me that I might not want to tell my people I had shared dinner with the family of a ‘terrorist,’ because before I know it I might be branded one myself...

This has been the last entry in my first series of fieldwork stories on this blog. I will continue with posting new entries when I start with my second fieldwork period planned for Spring 2014.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all people in Shabriha for being the amazingly helpful hosts, extremely knowledgeable respondents and wonderfully kind friends they have been to me over the last five months. I am especially grateful to my interpreter without whom I would not have been able to conduct this research and whose help and friendship has perhaps been the most important ingredient for the success of my fieldwork so far.