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Rural Telephony, Metropolitan Internet and Global
Politics of Development in South Lebanon

Kristin Shamas



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KRISTIN SHAMAS

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Abstract

This paper explores how a group of Orthodox Christians in Jdeidet, Marjeyoun, South Lebanon have historically accessed and re-appropriated communication technologies to maintain contact with Lebanese Christians in Beirut and abroad. It demonstrates how ties between the locations are frequently strained and occasionally severed due to regional and global events; yet, repeatedly, as impediments to interaction diminish, contact among groups of Marjeyounis is re-established. Upon such reconnecting, these Lebanese engage in hybrid processes of 'sociation', utilizing the entire spectrum of available technologies to amplify their interpersonal and group communications. Due to external contacts, local Marjeyounis consistently manage to bypass Lebanese political hierarchies and tap into outside resources to meet their development needs. Currently, online media are enabling unprecedented forms of familial and communal relations between Marjeyoun and the diaspora, further facilitating joint political activity among aggregate networks of dispersed individuals and groups. However, issues of translocal power destabilize sectarian and cultural identities among Jdeidet Marjeyounis residing both within and outside the village. As the groups collaborate in order to fulfil the perceived needs of both village and diasporic Lebanese, external political hegemonies are re-imagined and reproduced within the communities.

Keywords

Lebanon, communication, development

Introduction

As of January 1, 1996, Beirut contained 88 Internet-connected computers, otherwise known as servers or ‘hosts.’¹ While this figure pales compared to the 6,053,402 Internet hosts in the United States on that date, that Beirut possessed the physical and social infrastructure to sustain a computer-mediated telecommunication system is notable. Five years after the end of Lebanon’s US\$30 billion, 16-year ‘civil’ war, and only three years after the reformed Lebanese government’s launch of ‘Horizon 2000’—a US\$20 billion reconstruction program funded primarily through foreign reserves and international loans—1996’s signs of technological development prompted international analysts and corporate financiers to celebrate Beirut’s nascent economic repair.² In a rhetorical double movement, civic boosters attributed Beirut’s quick recovery to the city’s historic ability to inspire confidence in outside investors.³ In other words, they referred to foreign financial support in an effort to ensure its continuance.

Protracted emphasis on Beirut’s recovery raised concern among much of Lebanon’s population that the capital would be rebuilt to the exclusion of the rest of the country (Kisirwani, 1997). Although roughly 28% of Lebanon’s population remained below the poverty-line and the country faced a ballooning national debt, there seemed to be no limit on money the reformed government would borrow and spend to recreate Beirut as a corporate and banking centre.⁴ Popular scepticism and dissatisfaction intensified during the late 1990s as Lebanon’s economic recovery slowed and government spending beyond Beirut remained minimal. After the onset of economic recession in 1998, regions outside the Beirut city centre enjoyed only sporadic physical and social redevelopment.

Concurrent to the 1995 introduction of online facilities in Beirut, South Lebanon suffered military occupation. Not until May 2000 would Israeli forces pull out of the 10 km ‘security’ strip along Lebanon’s southern border. Thus, while redevelopment accelerated in Beirut during the mid 1990s, southern Lebanese were yet half a decade from experiencing even minor relief from hostilities among occupying Israelis; the Southern Lebanese Army (SLA); Hezbollah; Iranian and Syrian agents; and international ‘peacekeepers’ under the banner of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), all of whom were active in the area. Still, southern Christians by then realized the ire and suspicion with which the re-established (Syrian-backed) Lebanese government regarded them: ire due to the Christian-dominated SLA’s collaboration with Israel, and suspicion due to presumed Christian duplicity with Israeli agents.⁵ Christians in the south of Lebanon, therefore, deemed it highly unlikely that, if and when Israel left the area, Syrian-backed Lebanese elites would funnel much money or effort toward redeveloping Christian areas of the South.⁶

1 See, ‘Internet Domain Survey’, at: <http://www.nw.com>, as cited in: Cronin and McKim, ‘The Internet’, in *World Information Report 97/98* [online], available on: http://www.unesco.org/webworld/com_inf-reports/wirenglish/chap18.pdf [accessed 1 May 2003].

2 See e.g., ‘Up from Despair’, *Time Europe*, 15 January 1996; ‘Back in the game’, *The Economist*, 21 May 1998.

3 See e.g., Jessie Deeter and Anne Senges’s interview with ‘Solidere PR pointman, Nabil Rached’ in ‘Beirut Blues’, at *Anne Senges: writer/ journalist*, n.d., available on: <http://www.annesenges.com/englArt/lebanon/blues.htm> [accessed 29 December 2003].

4 Antoine Haddad, *Poverty in Lebanon* (in Arabic), ESCWA, Amman, 1996, as cited in: ‘Peaceful Transition in Lebanon’, *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English Internet edition), May 1999, available on: <http://mondediplo.com/1999/05/11liban> [accessed 17 November 2003].

5 As written by David Hirst in a 6 March 1999 article for the *Chicago Tribune* that is posted on the Jdeidet, Marjeyoun website, “[The Lebanese government] says it wants us to stay, to be steadfast”, said Kramallah Daher, who imports goods from Israel, “but it is suspicious of us because we do stay—and doesn’t give us the means to be steadfast. We have to live. Is it more our fault than the government’s if some turn to Israel for that?”. Available on: <http://www.marjeyoun.cjb.net> [accessed 29 December 2003].

6 Based on formal and informal personal interviews in Oklahoma, USA, and Beirut, Marjeyoun, and Hisbaya, Lebanon between January 2000 and January 2004.

Yet villages in southern Lebanon, like other Lebanese villages, are not communities comprising only their physical inhabitants. Since the late 1800s, Lebanese have resettled throughout the world, and the global diaspora of Lebanese migrants, exiles, refugees and their descendants is reputed among some Lebanese to number as great as 15 million. Even the most cautious estimates place the number at not less than five million. As such, in both their imagining and actuality, Lebanese villages include translocal populations who, to varying degrees, visit, return, or send for relatives from elsewhere in Lebanon or abroad.⁷ Many dispersed villagers forward money and information; some own property that is abandoned or inhabited by remaining family. Extensive clan-based Lebanese ties result in most absent Lebanese being ‘related’ to at least a few village inhabitants who take part in local daily life. Thus, a large number of Lebanese outside their native village remain communally enfolded in village relations.

This paper explores how a group of Orthodox Christians in Jdeidet, Marjeyoun, South Lebanon have historically accessed and re-appropriated communication technologies to maintain contact with Lebanese Christians in Beirut and abroad. It demonstrates how ties between the locations are frequently strained and occasionally severed due to regional and global events; yet, repeatedly, as impediments to interaction diminish, contact among groups of Marjeyounis is re-established. Upon such reconnecting, these Lebanese engage in hybrid processes of ‘sociation’, utilizing the entire spectrum of available technologies to amplify their interpersonal and group communications. Due to external contacts, local Marjeyounis consistently manage to bypass Lebanese political hierarchies and tap into outside resources to meet their development needs. Currently, online media are enabling unprecedented forms of familial and communal relations between Marjeyoun and the diaspora, further facilitating joint political activity among aggregate networks of dispersed individuals and groups. However, issues of translocal power destabilize sectarian and cultural identities among Jdeidet Marjeyounis residing both within and outside the village. As the groups collaborate in order to fulfil the perceived needs of both village and diasporic Lebanese, political hegemonies introduced from outside the communities are continuously re-imagined and reproduced.

Jdeidet, Marjeyoun and Marjeyounis ‘Outside’

The people of Syria and Lebanon use major events as historical markers, rather than a specific year [...] in Marjeyoun 1894 is known as the year of the Hajjar, when a great migration to the new world took place. Some had been there and returned to relate various tales as to the riches of the American continent and describing the ways of life (Massad, 1986: 2).

Between 1860 and 1914, 225,000 people emigrated from the Ottoman province of Syria, including the area now known as Lebanon (Issawi, 1992). During this massive transfer of peoples, Mt. Lebanon lost more than 100,000 people, a quarter of its population, to the ‘New World’ (Khalaf, 1987). Marjeyoun, a multi-confessional village at the southern end of the Beqaa Valley with significant Orthodox and Catholic populations, is not atypical of other Lebanese villages that lost large numbers of their inhabitants. Clusters of Marjeyouni emigrants resettled in diverse areas of the Americas, including Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Toronto, Canada; and Kansas and Oklahoma, US (Shadid, 1992). This paper analyzes the methods, means and results of communication between Marjeyoun and Marjeyouni-descended Christians settled in Oklahoma, US. By considering historic ties between Lebanon and a long-established community of Lebanese migrants and descendants, it indicates how new information technologies enable sociological processes both similar to and different from those of previous communicative modes.

Early Immigration: Sustained Homeland Contact, Sustained Homeland Identities

The first Orthodox Marjeyounis travelled to Oklahoma in the 1880s, prior to statehood, when the area was still Oklahoma and Indian Territories. As Ottoman oppression and demographic pressures

⁷ Anja Peleikis (2003) defines a Lebanese village as ‘translocal’ according to its sustained relationship with foreign emigrants.

'pushed' Christians to immigrate from the areas around Mount Lebanon in the decades prior to World War I, a burgeoning coal and petrol industry, rapid population growth, and the availability of land for agriculture 'pulled' Marjeyounis in a pattern of chain migration to the Midwest US (Caldwell, 1984; Lucas, 1996). Oral and unpublished family histories of Marjeyounis in Oklahoma and Lebanon demonstrate that, as early as the 1890s, the potential for financial success in Oklahoma was well known among Marjeyouni in Lebanon. In the decades prior to World War I, Lebanese Christians sent tales of success from the New World via letters, telegrams and occasional returnees; hence, the trail from South Lebanon to Oklahoma flowed with a constant exchange of populations. Money usually accompanied letters or sojourners to Lebanon, sometimes enough to sponsor remaining family to join the inchoate Marjeyouni American community. Conversely, some migrants earned enough to return to their village and retire, bringing a relative degree of prosperity to the local economy (Shamas, 2000).⁸

Although other Lebanese groups settled in Oklahoma—including a significant population of Maronite Catholics who descended from the neighbouring villages of Bdadoun and Wadi Shakur, Alley Caza on Mount Lebanon—a Marjeyoun village identity remained the 'public face' for Lebanese-Oklahomans until the late 1990s. As Marjeyouni migration continued and Marjeyouni descendants came to comprise an overwhelming majority of the group, their village identity subsumed other Oklahoma Lebanese identities to form a joined 'Lebanese Oklahoman' community.⁹ As demonstrated below, Lebanese Oklahoman identities continually shifted throughout the twentieth century due to processes of communication among Marjeyounis in South Lebanon, Beirut and the diaspora.

Interrupted Contact: Minority Identity and 'Assimilation' in the US

The migration created certain disadvantages. The country itself lost these people forever, as the emigrees adopted their new countries and became citizens, and, lost their children, wholly foreigners regarding their parent's homeland and their language (Massad, 1986: 3).

Throughout the 1900s, connections between Marjeyoun and the US were facilitated, in theory, by the introduction of new technologies that 'compressed' time and space and allowed for an easier exchange of people and information. Politics, however, did not always compliment such technologies. For instance, the combined result of World War I and the 1924 US Immigration Act placing a severe quota on non-European immigrants was a prolonged interruption in population movement between Lebanon and the US (Saliba, 1981). Granted, after 1919 until the end of the 1920s, some Lebanese in the US were able to return to Lebanon to visit family and get married. However, with the commencement of the economic depression in the 1930s, this return travel stopped.

During their brief period of interaction with Lebanese Christians in Lebanon in the 1920s, Lebanese Americans were exposed to the prevalent Maronite nationalism of Phoenicianism, a notion that Lebanese Christians maintain a Mediterranean ancestry stretching back to the ancient Near-Eastern civilization of Phoenicia. In line with the Maronites' political aspirations in Lebanon, this Phoenician Maronite identity seeks to meld a contemporary pro-Western, Christian Lebanon with a proto-Muslim, Mediterranean civilization of the past (Hourani, 1981). Significantly, after Lebanese sojourns to the homeland in the 1920s, the Arab American press disseminated this Phoenician ideology among immigrants in the US. One of the most notable influences on the Marjeyouni Oklahomans in terms of their Middle Eastern identities was *The Syrian World*, a monthly magazine

8 Based on previous studies of the community (Caldwell and Lucas); unpublished family histories; and interviews of Lebanese Oklahomans in 1999/2000. Naff (1992) discusses similar processes among other Lebanese American communities.

9 Representations of the Lebanese-Oklahoman community in Oklahoma City and Tulsa newspapers name it as descending from Marjeyoun. This is partly due to St. Elijah Orthodox church's significant public presence, as explained below.

published in English in New York from 1926 to 1932 (Halaby, 1982). *The Syrian World* carried numerous references to and stories about the Phoenician origins of Lebanese Christians.¹⁰

In the face of dominant white cultural pressures in the US, both Lebanese Maronites and Orthodox in Oklahoma subscribed to the prevalent Phoenician ideology and its accompanying assimilatory advantages. Additionally, with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and increased nativist threats toward Lebanese shopkeepers and youth in Oklahoma, many Lebanese immigrants emphasized a general Christian ancestry rather than a Catholic or Orthodox one. In doing so, Lebanese Oklahomans subverted their sectarian differences and jointly pursued political and economic achievement in the US (Shamas, 2000). Initially, a discrete Marjeyoun-based identity was maintained among Orthodox immigrants through the creation of St. Elijah Orthodox church in Oklahoma City (Habiby, 1981). Established in 1920, the church served as a meeting point for Lebanese from across the state and from various Lebanese Oklahoman generations. However, after the 1930s a general Christian identity eclipsed an Eastern Orthodox one among the St. Elijah congregation, as the Oklahoma Marjeyounis sought to ‘Protestantize’ and thus improve their fortunes in a new homeland.¹¹ This loss of sectarian identity corresponded with the general acculturation of Syro-Lebanese immigrants into wider American society during the 1930s and 40s due to such factors as mutual host-migrant experiences of the depression; Lebanese participation as combatants in World War II; a gradual loss of Arabic language; and a cessation in the arrival of new immigrants from Lebanon (Hooglund, 1987; Suleiman, 1987).

Re-established Contact: Beneficial Liaisons

The Marjeyoun immigrants were ahead of all other communities in offering to help their home town and contributed to its development. There were several enterprises which were subsidized by the immigrants, such as building homes, bringing electricity to the town, opening a college and giving endowments to the churches and benevolent societies [...] (Massad, 1986: 3).

At the conclusion of World War II, travel was re-established between Oklahoma and South Lebanon. Many Marjeyouni Oklahomans who could afford to do so again returned to Lebanon for visits. Additionally, in 1952 the first US to Jdeideh international telephone call was made. Oral and family histories in both places refer to the excitement generated at this new form of interpersonal and group communication.¹² Notably, renewed contact with the homeland coincided with the conspicuous rise of Lebanese nationalism in Lebanon after the end of the French mandate; subsequently, immigrants and their descendants in Oklahoma shifted from referring to themselves as ‘Syrian’ to calling themselves ‘Lebanese’ (Shamas, 2000). Such diffusion of a nominal Lebanese identity was facilitated by a combination of communicative processes, including face-to face, written, and telephone contact between members of the US diaspora and the Lebanese homeland, and intra-diasporic interaction in the US via interpersonal, group/church, and mass media means (ibid.).

Meanwhile, after 1948, southern Lebanon’s economy suffered the closing of the Palestinian/Lebanese border. According to Ahmad Beydoun, the creation of Israel resulted in a redirecting of southern Lebanese economic activity northwards and ‘the rural exodus from the south [...] began in earnest’ (1992: 35). The influx of Palestinian refugees further destabilized social

10 See for instance the August 1929 issue, volume 4, number 2, in which a number of letters to the editor contain references to the Phoenician origins of Syro-Lebanese Christians. As early as 1909, Maronite Dr. H. A. El Khourie wrote to Birmingham, Alabama newspapers defending Syro-Lebanese immigrants against racism. These two letters were compiled with an essay and distributed in a document entitled ‘In Defense of the Semitic and the Syrian Especially.’ The pamphlet traces the origins of the ‘Semitic family of the white race’ and chronicles their contributions to world civilization, including ‘advances in navigation, to the origin of the alphabet, and to achievements in art that stem from the Phoenicians’ (Conklin & Fares 1987: 78-79).

11 During the 1950s, B.D. ‘Babe’ Eddie actively lobbied the Antiochian Metropolitan to change the celebrated date of Orthodox Easter in America to coincide with that of Protestant Easter (Ham, 72).

12 See e.g., ‘Firsts in Jdeidet’, available on: <http://www.marjeyoun.cjb.net> [accessed 26 April 2003].

structures affected by a continuing labour- and 'brain-drain' from the South to Beirut. Thus re-established communicative and cultural ties between the US and Marjeyoun were both economically and politically beneficial to the diminishing Christian population of Marjeyoun. As written by the son of Dr. Michael Shadid, whose father immigrated from Jdeideh at the turn of the century and in 1929 founded in Oklahoma the only cooperative hospital to have existed in US history:

My father's continued remembrance of the hunger, poverty, and lack of health care in Lebanon stimulated his desire to build and equip a hospital in the town of his birth. He launched this project in 1949, travelling all over the United States, Canada, and Brazil, obtaining donations from Lebanese people. He was also successful in getting the Lebanese government to agree to match all funds he raised. After three years of hard and difficult work he successfully completed a ten-bed hospital [Hospital Haramoon] with offices for three doctors in the town of 6,000 people, Judedeit-Merjeyoun, where he was born. He was extremely proud of this achievement (Shadid, 1992: 269).

Similarly, a biography of Lebanese Oklahoman industrialist and millionaire B.D. 'Babe' Eddie details Eddie's 1953 return visit to Beirut and his home village of Jdeideh. Greeted at the Beirut airport by 'some 500 friends, relatives, government officials, and church leaders' who waited with 'love shining in their eyes, hearts throbbing, heads high with pride, lips whispering telling one another bits and parts of the life of the boy who left Merjayoun and Lebanon at the age of two to work his way in the United States', Eddie met with prominent Lebanese officials and church leaders who praised his 'true Christian' character (Meredith and Meredith, 1982: 127). The next day Eddie travelled south; 60 Marjeyouni cars and busses waited at the Litani River to accompany him into Jdeideh, where the Orthodox priest kissed and blessed him. Significantly, in 1955 Eddie pledged a new building for the Orthodox congregation in Marjeyoun. According to Eddie's biography:

Because of this pledge, as well as the friendships which he made or renewed during his visit to Lebanon in 1953, he maintained a close correspondence with the people in that region. As a result, he was able to keep abreast of the fast-moving events there as never before. Letters written to him in Arabic went to Elia D. Madey of New York City for translation, as did letters he sent back. While much of this correspondence dealt with international issues, many of the issues discussed were on a local or community level. One controversy, which developed to such a level of intensity that articles about it appeared in two Arabic-language newspapers in New York City, El-Sameer and Meratt-El-Gharb, caused him so much pain and grief that he wrote an emotional open letter to the people of the village begging them to put an end to their feud (ibid.).

Eddie was also asked to join the Board of Trustees of the American University of Beirut (AUB). According to his biography: 'The position of trustee allowed Eddie to bridge the distance between the United States and Lebanon in a new way. He hoped that his commitment of both time and money would help strengthen the relationship between the two nations' (ibid, 128). Thus, after Eddie's visit, and due to continued correspondence between Eddie and his contacts in Marjeyoun and Beirut, Eddie contributed money to the village church and to national institutions like AUB.

Various sources detail how funds from abroad and political influence on the part of successful migrants contributed to the development of villages throughout southern Lebanon (Amery and Anderson, 1995; Beydoun, 1992; Peleikas, 2003). International communication between groups facilitated not only a flow of funds and a degree of national political influence to the South, but also information and knowledge of technologies. An article posted to the Jdeidet, Marjeyoun website boasts that Jdeideh was 'the first border town to have electricity in the early 1950s when its people abroad donated three generators' (Shadid, 2001). Jdeideh's relative 'modernness' comprises a significant element of its inhabitants' village identity. An interviewed Marjeyouni 17 year-old male writes:

Did you know that Jdeideh b4 the occupation took the award of the best organized municipality in all of Lebanon, & the underground structure for sewages was developed from more then 30yrs ago at that time

there were no/barely sewages in all Beirut & till now there are no sewages in the North of Lebanon. But the occupation has just freezed Marjeyoun development (email interview, 3 January 2004).¹³

Prior to the start of the 1975 civil war, most area villages had accessed electricity; a majority of the larger villages had running water; and the South Lebanon Highway and many of the main streets of the villages were paved. A modern telephone exchange centre located in Jdeideh serviced the area and linked Marjeyoun directly to Beirut, and via Beirut, overseas.

However, despite the efforts of Lebanese migrants to contribute to the local economy, Marjeyoun endured significant depopulation and financial decline prior to the start of the Lebanese war. During the late 1960s, the newly established Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) settled in South Lebanon, primarily in the Sunni region of the Arkoub area, and unsettled social relations in small villages between Shiites, Sunnis, Druze and Christians (Beydoun, 1992). Along with the increase of Palestinian and Syrian factions in the area, Israel built up a military and intelligence presence. Attacks and retaliations between the groups escalated until May 1970, when the first land battle took place, primarily in the Arkoub. Many southern Lebanese considered this eruption of open hostilities to demonstrate that the area had slipped out of government control. Unfortunately, regional instability in South Lebanon foretold the national maelstrom that would follow from 1975.

War in Lebanon: Uneasy Connections and Realigned Ties

In *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir*, Jean Said Makdisi includes a chapter on ‘Crisis, with a Glossary of Terms Used in Times of Crisis.’ She writes:

<i>rah yiftah al matar</i>	the airport is going to open
<i>ray y salhu al kahraba</i>	they are going to fix the electricity
<i>mishi at telex</i>	the telex is working
<i>telefoni mishi</i>	my phone is working

A friend once told me of a game called *salata* (‘salad’) that he and his siblings used to play as children in Damascus. The players sit in a circle and the first says: ‘I’d like to make a salad but I have no lettuce.’ The next says: ‘I’d like to make a salad but I have no lettuce or tomatoes.’ The next: ‘I’d like to make a salad but I have no lettuce, tomatoes, or garlic’, and so on, each player having to reproduce the list in the right order and to add an item to it. This game, he said, is like living in Beirut. One day, the airport closes, the next the airport is still closed and the electricity goes, then the airport and the electricity still not in order, the telephone dies [...] (1990: 63-64).

Throughout the various ‘cease-fires’ and stages of war in Lebanon, time and again infrastructure and services were re-established only to be interrupted by the next round of hostilities. Lebanese living in Beirut at the time describe the intermittent difficulties in contacting neighbours across the street, friends on the other side of the city, family in villages, family and friends overseas, etc. Irregularity of telephone contact, in fact, is depicted as an elemental characteristic of Beirut life during the war in written accounts and Lebanese literature.¹⁴ Additionally, Lebanese living overseas at the time report the constant challenge of establishing phone contact with Beirut. Even in periods of relative Lebanese stability, an international line into the country was semi-occasional. An interviewed Lebanese-American who left Lebanon during the war as a young child describes how, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, her parents paid her and her brothers small fees to sit on the phone and try to get an international line into Beirut:

13 Due to the informal nature of e-mail exchanges, interview texts cited in this paper are not grammatically corrected, nor are interviewee’s misspellings noted with ‘sic.’

14 For instance, Emily Nasrallah’s short story ‘We Are All Alright’ describes a lack of telephone contact between East and West Beirut and its impact on Beirut interpersonal relationships; pages 2-3 of Hanan Al-Shaykh’s *Beirut Blues* depicts intermittent telephone contact between Lebanese in Beirut and overseas, as well as the dual nature of such contact: it comforted Beirutis yet also highlighted the disparate realities of violence at home and peace abroad.

They'd give us a dollar and we'd sit there for an hour, calling the operator: 'Could you put me through to Beirut, please?' 'Sorry, there are no lines available. Please try again.' 'Could you put me through to Beirut, please?' 'Sorry, there are no lines available ...' It seemed like it never worked, we never got through (personal interview, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 4 January 2004).

Precarious contact from and to Beirut affected not only informal means of communication: journalist Robert Fisk in *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* details the many times that difficulty in international phone contact either from inside Lebanon or from overseas to Lebanon impeded the flow of international 'news' both to and from the country (1990). Thus, during the war, contact between Lebanese was not always possible: interpersonal and group ties were subsequently strained and occasionally severed within Lebanon and between Lebanon and outside.

Initially the war in Beirut did not greatly influence the south of Lebanon. Beydoun writes that, with the start of the war in 1975, 'the south remained relatively quiet for over a year. Indeed, the various phases of the war were felt in the south mainly through the successive swelling and shrinking of the villages, each of which had at least as many native sons in Beirut and its suburbs as had remained behind' (1992: 39). This relative quiet ended in summer 1976, however, as the Lebanese army split along sectarian lines and many young men returned to the South, 'politicized and confessionalized—one could even say fanaticized', according to Beydoun (40). Various military factions repositioned themselves throughout this region removed from centralized government control. The Muslim Lebanese Arab Army took over existing barracks in Marjeyoun built during the French mandate to house the first Lebanese Army unit, while Christian militias grouped in Christian villages and Israelis progressively intervened into the area. By 1976, many villages had no access to the electric grid or running water, as military groups had commandeered the facilities.¹⁵ Roadblocks, armed confrontations, artillery fire, and aerial missions on the part of Israel and Syria complicated travel to, from and within the region, and contributed to the general disorder and chaos of the South.

Regional isolation of the South from the capital (and vice-versa) appears to comprise a strategic component of Israel's geopolitical objectives in Lebanon. As early as 1962, IDF documents indicate that, in a coup d'état attempt against the Chehab government, a small rebel group of Christians set off from the South for Beirut and 'cut telephone lines on the way, but Beirut HQ was warned of their coming by wireless radio communications' (Hamizrachi, 1988: 4). The rebels were later caught heading for the Israeli border with a radio transmitter supplied by Israel. Nearly total isolation of the South as a consistent Israeli objective is particularly discernible after 1976. During that autumn, Christian militias and Israeli Defence Forces drove the Lebanese Arab Army from the Marjeyoun barracks; the area's telephone exchange was destroyed in the confrontation. Regional communication subsequently came to depend on the IDF, and its Southern Lebanese command rented a small house on the main street in Metula, a village on the Israeli side of the border. According to Beate Hamizrachi, who in 1977 was appointed the press officer for the Israeli-backed Lebanese Forces, 'it was equipped with wireless and field telephones linking Metula to the militia headquarters in Kleia and with the IDF Northern Command' (Hamizrachi, 1988: 73). Hamizrachi repeatedly describes how, upon the appointment of Lebanese officers to the position of village commanders, the IDF supplied the officer with weapons, a radio set, and/or a military field telephone (86-88).

As a result of the South's increased isolation from the rest of Lebanon, ties between some South Lebanese villages and Israel strengthened. Due to contacts between Israelis and Christian soldiers who had left the Lebanese Army, as well as a lack of Lebanese government sources for provisions, resources began to flow from Israel north to Lebanon: in summer 1976 Israel laid a water pipeline to the 'Good Fence'—a station on the border between the two countries—to supply water to villagers cut

15 In 1976, Israeli forces compiled a 'status report' on the condition of area villages, and in their report, they attribute the loss of centralized regional electricity and water to the actions of the PLO and LAA (Hamizrachi, 1988: 78).

off due to war damage to the system (ibid. 66). Apparently, the Lebanese Army paymaster travelled by boat from Beirut to Israel and then north to the village of Kleia via Syrian jeeps.¹⁶

In March 1978, Israeli forces invaded South Lebanon all the way to the Litani River and did not retreat into Israel until June of the same year. Upon its retreat, the IDF turned the 10 km security strip over to the SLA under Major Saad Haddad, and the Israeli-allied Christian militia headquartered itself in the barracks at Marjeyoun. Later promoted to General, Haddad ‘carried out his duty of supervising the central and western sectors [...] through radio transmissions and rare visits’ (Hamizrachi, 1988: 105). By the time of Israel’s withdrawal in June 1978, Hamizrachi reports that ‘all the villages were connected by radio and in some cases by field-telephone to the IDF command’ in Metula (170).

Ahmad Beydoun describes how, with the re-invasion of South Lebanon in June 1982 and its subsequent 18-year military occupation by Israel, the area no longer formed ‘just a buffer zone insulating the Israeli border.’ Virtually isolated and requiring permits from the IDF and/or SLA to either enter or leave, it comprised a strategic vantage point from which Israel could monitor and ‘keep its guns trained on’ Druze, Sunni, Shiite, and Palestinian areas in the region: ‘[T]he vital road skirting the coast towards Beirut and the north could be cut at any time, as could many axes of communication used by the Syrian troops stationed in Lebanon. In short, compared to the 1978 zone, the new ‘security zone’ had a much-enhanced offensive value for the Israelis’ (1992: 48).

Upon the reinvasion, Israel established phone lines between many Christian-dominated southern Lebanese villages and Israel; inhabitants of villages in Marjeyoun, including Jdeideh and other smaller ones, indicate that ‘phone centres’ with Israeli lines were operational by the mid-1980s. Marjeyounis in Oklahoma describe occasionally calling for family in Jdeideh via an Israeli country pre-fix; calls, however, were rare due to their excessive cost to the inhabitants of South Lebanon, who were charged by the phone centres an even higher rate to receive the call than those living abroad paid to place it—sometimes reputedly twice as much.

Throughout the 1980s and as late as 1996 and 1999, Israel repeatedly demonstrated that telephony and infrastructure between Beirut and the South remained primary military targets.¹⁷ In a description of the May 1999 Israeli attacks on Lebanon, a Lebanese living in Beirut reports:

They bombed five important bridges and a main part of the Beirut–Sidon highway. Jamhour and Jiyeh power plants were bombed, right now Beirut has no power supply. Most roads and bridges linking villages and towns in the South were bombed, civilians were killed in the process [...] There was intense shelling from the sea as well on the southern coast. Baalbeck and the Bekaa were badly bombed as well [...] The main aim of the government right now is to restore some power, phone lines and water supply primarily to the South (badly hit) and Beirut. You can’t go to the South via regular roads, but I think one can go via Jizzin. No access or phone lines to the South whatsoever. Since the bridge of alAwwali was destroyed, the main access to the south is gone, the army is working to set up as quickly as possible some temporary replacement to get supplies to the villages (Farouqi, 1999).

According to Khodr (1996), the aerial raids cut lines to more than 50,000 cellular phones.

Unsurprisingly, residents of Beirut report only occasional visits to the South during this period. As a Marjeyoun-descended Beirutite writes:

The visits were very rare during the war period. They only increased after 1992. Still, they remained occasional as I was born and lived most of my life in Beirut. I visited Marjeyoun for specific

16 Based on interviews with the Kleia Maronite priest and a spokesman for the Lebanese Forces in the South (Hamizrachi, 1988: 74). Hamizrachi cites an interview with Colonel Benyamin ‘Fuad’ Ben-Eliezer, the first IDF chief of the South Lebanese Command, to explain that ‘everybody was trying to draw the South Lebanese soldiers to their side and the Saiqa [a military branch of the Syrian Baath Party] competed with the LAA, the PLO and the IDF in this respect’ (74).

17 A report by Khatib & Alami Consolidated Engineering using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software confirmed that during the April 1996 raids on southern Lebanon, 102 telephone lines and 351 roads were totally or partially damaged (Kabara & Soubra 1997).

reasons...I did not personally try to keep in touch [by telephone] but my parents did. Of course during the war it was much more difficult and eased later on (email interview, 3 January 2003).

Conversely, a freelance writer reported from Marjeyoun: 'One Lebanese I met takes his daughter to Israel for treatment by a specialist. Although he could travel to Beirut, the easier route is to go south. Ditto for traveling abroad. Tel Aviv is closer and easier than Beirut' (Raschka, 1995).

Due to the lack of contact between Marjeyoun and the diaspora, as well as international press attention to Lebanon and its emphasis on the breakdown of 'Christian-Muslim' relations among the Lebanese population, sectarian and village identities among Lebanese Oklahomans remained subverted to a general Lebanese Christian unity--until the mid-1980s. This unity is underscored by the increased salience of 'Phoenicianism' among Lebanese-Oklahomans at the time, as demonstrated by unpublished and published family and church histories, and by studies of the Lebanese-Oklahoman community (Shamas, 2000). Yet via the various forces of 'globalisation', including renewed migration, cellular telephony, and computer-mediated communication, contact would again be re-established between the locales, and ambivalent village and sectarian identities would give way to 're-Middle Easternized' identities.

Post-1970s Translocal Contact: Sectarianism, Village Identity, and Cultural Myths

The following section explains how the new wave of immigrants 'pushed' from Lebanon during the 1970s and 80s by war and Israeli invasion reinvigorated the Oklahoma Marjeyouni community. In conjunction with increased opportunities for mediated translocal contact, interpersonal contact between 'politicized' Arab immigrants and 'acculturated' Lebanese Oklahomans generated in Oklahoma a microcosm of broader Arab-American politics at the time: a struggle between impulses to either continue expressing commonality with US political hegemonies, or to endorse a discretely Arab position regarding US policy and events in the Middle East. 'Traditional' means of interpersonal and group communication among Lebanese in Oklahoma were not abandoned with the ascendance of new information technologies—in fact, it was increased local contact among Lebanese that created the impetus for strengthened mediated ties between Lebanese in various locales. However, the capacity of the Internet to propagate and inculcate divergent Lebanese political agendas managed to subvert some long-standing Lebanese-Oklahoman community ties. As this section describes, due to strengthened local and translocal religious and village-based networks, Lebanese-Oklahoman identity began to rupture along sectarian lines.

Renewed Antiochian Orthodox Identity

Religious institutions contributed significantly to the reintroduction of sectarian Lebanese identity processes in Oklahoma. Initially, St. Elijah's Antiochian Church, and, as described later, eventually St. Ephraim's Maronite Mission, would play determinative roles in re-Middle Easternizing the Lebanese Oklahoman community. A cultural history of St. Elijah Orthodox Church in Oklahoma City describes the leadership of Father Constantine Nasr at St. Elijah since 1982. The author contends that Father Nasr arrived at St. Elijah to find a congregation which, in *Abuna's* [our father's] opinion, was 'too highly Protestantized' (86). Comprised mostly of descendants of Marjeyoun, the St. Elijah's congregation had largely lost its Eastern Orthodox cultural identity. Nasr, a refugee from Palestine raised in Jerusalem until his high school years, put the return of St. Elijah to being Orthodox 'at the forefront of his agenda' (88). Nasr 'pursued this mission through a retreat into ethnicity', including the reading of a Gospel in Arabic at each service. 'He hoped that by reminding the congregation they were Arabic, he would at the same time remind them they were Orthodox' (88).

Meanwhile, Ham states that by 1982, the St. Elijah congregation included Arab immigrants who had 'lost their lands to the Israelis, or who had fled the constant killing and militancy of the region. Their Orthodoxy had not yet been tainted by Protestantism [...] they brought with them their national expressions of their faith. The new Arab immigrants brought their Arab nationalisms with them. The same issues that united them in their old country united them here' (88).

While contact at St. Elijah with ‘Arab nationalisms’ and recent refugees from South Lebanon promulgated Marjeyouni sympathies with the peoples of their homeland, other forms of ‘globalisation’, especially re-established lines of communication after the end of war in Beirut, reinforced such sympathies. With the end of hostilities in Lebanon north of the Litani River in 1991, telephone and interpersonal communication between Lebanese in Beirut and the US steadily increased. Some Lebanese returned to Beirut for visits during the 1990s. Meanwhile, the introduction of cellular telephony and internet servers into Lebanon enabled more extensive contact between Lebanon and the diaspora than ever before.

Cellular Telecommunications: Re-Established Ties between Marjeyoun and ‘the Outside’

According to a report on telecommunications in Lebanon published by Lebanese American University’s Centre for Sponsored Research & Development, ‘Lebanon’s mobile phone sector is a success story’ (Jaoud, n.d.). In 1994, 10-year build-operate-transfer (BOT) contracts were awarded to two cellular phone companies, LibanCell and France Telecom Mobile, otherwise known as Cellis, to operate global system for mobile communications (GSM) cellular systems. These contracts, originally due to expire in 2005, were initially negotiated to include a potential extension of two years before the networks and equipment would revert to the government. However, recent public and press accusations of corruption and exploitation on the part of the cell phone companies—a considerable portion of whose profits go to a handful of Lebanese political elites—resulted in a renegotiation of temporary contracts during 2003. A portion of the Lebanese press and civil society assert that political elites stalled national landline redevelopment in order to facilitate a LibanCell-Cellis telecommunication ‘duopoly’ (Gambill, 2003).

Granted, because state-owned landlines remained inoperable in many regions and unreliable in others, cell phone usage skyrocketed in Lebanon in the decade after its introduction. According to *UNESCO World Communication Report, 1997* Lebanon in 1995 had 30 cellular mobile telephone subscribers per thousand inhabitants. This number can be compared to, for instance, 2 subscribers per thousand inhabitants in Jordan; 36 subscribers per thousand inhabitants in Qatar; and 54 subscribers per thousand inhabitants in United Arab Emirates.¹⁸ By 1997-98, the ratio of cellular subscribers in Lebanon was 156.7 subscribers per 1,000 people, an increase of 422 %. Comparably, United Arab Emirates’ ratio increased to 209.6, an increase of 287%.¹⁹ By July 2000, UNESCO Courier reported that 45% of phones in Lebanon were mobile (Lopez, 2003).

An interviewed source in Marjeyoun writes:

As I remember the first mobile company to open in marjeyoun was Cellis (FTML), then Libancell after 1 & ½ or 2yrs after Cellis. I guess mobile phones were launched in 1995-1996 in Marjeyoun, and the connections was bad at first you got to move from room to another for a better reception, then after each yr it got better! (email interview, 2 January 2004).

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) regional advisor for communications and computer networking concurs that, while in some areas of the South cellular signals are not strong enough, ‘Marjeyoun is one of the towns that has better coverage’ (email interview, 9 January 2004).

The introduction of cell phones into Jdeideh drastically improved the ability of locals to contact Beirut, although, initially, cell phones were cost prohibitive. An interviewed Marjeyouni writes:

My brother was in AUB & there was one station where they got direct TELEPHONE connections to Beirut, people used it a lot b4 mobile phones. My brother used to come to Marjeyoun in holidays &

18 UNESCO, 1997. *World Communication Report: The Media and the Challenge of the New Technologies*, available on: http://www.unesco.org/webworld/com_inf_reports/com_rep_pdf_new/eng_1.pdf [accessed 3 May 2003], 4.

19 Ibid, 369

we used to live in Jdeidet Marjeyoun then we moved to Beirut in 1997, so before that (1995-97) we used to call him & send him food+\$ with the Taxis that work on the Marjeyoun>Beirut line. And at that time many of our friends who were mainly in universities in Beirut their parents came & used our mobile phone [...] people wouldn't speak less than 30mins & it was very expensive at first, now it's cheap (same \$ all over Lebanon) (email interview, 3 January 2004).

Another writes: 'Well at first few families had cellular phones, because at first the line costed \$1000+ the mobile also was very expensive \$1300 would be considered a cheap catch. Now it's very cheap even my cat got one :)' (email interview, 4 January 2004). Like communication specialist Babacar Fall points out of farmers in Côte d'Ivoire, South Lebanese regarded a mobile phone as the property of the community. As telecommunication with the outside worked to promote collective good, a 'culture of sharing the tools of communication' had emerged (Lopez, 2003).

Conversely, Marjeyounis in Oklahoma describe that, with the introduction of cellular telephony into Lebanon, some of them spoke to family and friends for the first time in several years, or in some instances, the first time ever. A second-generation Lebanese-American reported:

I'd never met my mom's family... But her only brother lived in Beirut, and her mother and father were in Jdeideh, and she only really heard about her parents, how they were doing, from my uncle. But then one weekend my uncle went to Jdeideh and we talked on his cell phone. We couldn't talk a long time and their English wasn't, you know, great. But I got to talk to them (Personal interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 22 July 2000).

As one Lebanese Oklahoman reports, he paid more than US\$1200 for a cellular phone for his parents in Marjeyoun in order that he could more easily contact them (personal interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 12 June, 2004). Other Lebanese describe how locals in Marjeyoun kept in 'better touch' with relatives in Beirut and overseas after the introduction of cell phones. Marjeyounis were able to convince Beirutis to more often visit, especially for big events like weddings and christenings. As Anja Peleikas writes in *Lebanese in Motion*, the cellular phone 'allows people to keep in touch and contribute to family decision-making, as well as to participate in family events at a considerable distance' (2003: 97). Thus with the introduction of cell phones into South Lebanon, Marjeyounis were able to tenuously reconnect family outside to local happenings.

The Internet: Locating Lebanese and Promoting 'Unity' via the World Wide Web

Upon the establishment of Internet servers in Beirut in 1995, Lebanese in Beirut and abroad demonstrated a sense of urgency in attempts to locate family and friends dispersed during the war. Sites like 'The Lebanese White Pages' and 'Proud to be Lebanese.com', were established as early as 1996 through joint ventures between Lebanese in Lebanon and overseas.²⁰ Lebanese postings to comment boards formed a polylogue constitutive of the sites' identifying purposes, and early visitors to the Lebanese White Pages posted comments like:

I think that this page is very important to Lebanese people since they can find each other again after the war has spread us every where in the earth ...

Congratulations guys for unifying Lebanese together all over the world.

I seriously believe that this is the best way to unite Lebanese all around the world.

Thank you for your site and I hope this will be another successful step forward in the unity of our people.

Just want to express my gratitude on a wonderful idea. Hoping that more Lebanese will join your cause in bringing the Lebanese people closer in such difficult times.²¹

20 For instance, The Lebanese White Pages' founding partners are located in Beirut and France; see: <http://www.leb.org>; also see <http://www.proud-to-be-lebanese.com>.

21 'Testimonials' at *The Lebanese White Pages*, available on: <http://www.leb.org/v3/feedback> [accessed 20 August 2003].

The emphasis on Lebanese unity provided Lebanese in Beirut a sense of communal strength. Further, it worked to secure Lebanon's fragile postwar identity as a country with ties to people outside who would economically and physically restore the country.

Beirutis and recent migrants were not the only Lebanese to find such websites useful. 'Proud-to-be-Lebanese' members of the diaspora created directories and comment boards on which Lebanese from all over the world signed up and made connections. As written by the webmaster for the Lebanon Genealogical Web Project at rootsweb.com:

Years ago I started to collect info about my family heritage, mostly because I did not know all of our family branches. We are a family, not atypically, spread all over the world, and we have cousins (in Mexico for example) who have never been to Lebanon, neither have their parents, not their grandparents. So I started out, and with time, luck, and other factors, I located most of our family members (except still for Brazil). And I put it on the internet for the benefit of all the family members, as well as to possibly locate other members who might browse it by chance. The web site helped me locate a few members that I would never have been able to locate ... Many people on the site forums were able to locate each other, as well as friends, and that I think helped bring Lebanese emigrants together (email interview, 23 April 2003).

In the West and 'New World', diasporic Lebanese websites beckoned to ambivalent identities with multiple ties. With the rise of Western multiculturalism after the 1960s and 70s, including its attendant political cynicisms and cultural unrest, members of many Western societies worked to position themselves in relation to the past. As stated by a spokesman for the International Genealogical Index project on the web: 'There is in all of us a 'soul hunger', a desire to know who we are and where we come from; to know about our ancestors, where they came from and their way of life' (Ward, 2002). In 'Genealogy and Sociology: A Preliminary Set of Statements and Speculations', Michael Erben points out that genealogy can serve as a source of historical sociology in that it 'sheds light on family conduct historically' and demonstrates the ideological importance of issues for particular families, subgroups and societies (1991). Thus, to present your genealogical information is to announce sociologically who you are. In late-twentieth century multicultural societies, such pronouncements appealed to peoples who felt 'removed from their roots.' To illustrate, comments posted to both American Indian and Lebanese genealogy websites articulate the desire of site visitors to locate relatives and community members 'lost by time.'²²

Additionally, for Lebanese living in the US, identification with other Lebanese via Lebanese websites tapped into a resurgence of Lebanese identity that was not out of line with a growing Arab American identity and other de-assimilatory trends in the US. In 1993, Theodore Pulcini wrote in the *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 'Over two million persons of Arabic heritage live in the US, the majority of them third- or fourth-generation descendants of Christian immigrants. Studies of Arab-Americans have proliferated in recent decades.' This renewal of Lebanese cultural identity coincided with a public 'awakening' of Lebanese/Arab-American political identity. As Steven Salaita describes:

By the 1990s, a thoroughly Arab consciousness existed in Arab immigrants and American-born Arabs, who rapidly were expressing that consciousness intellectually and creatively [...] this phenomenon can only be understood if we situate it with similar phenomena occurring with individuals from other ethnic groups—N. Scott Momaday's famous example of his mixedblood mother 'choosing' to be Cherokee, for instance. It is no accident that such ethnic valuations, whatever their merits and problems, corresponded with the rise of the Black and Indian power movements of the sixties and seventies. While it is difficult to comprehend fully the effects of those movements, they often gave marginalized, lonely, or ambivalent youth (or adults in some cases) the illusion of stable identity or a feeling of belonging to communities distinguishable from

22 'Viewer's Feedback' at *Lebanon GenWeb Project*, available on: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~lbnwgv/feedback.htm>. [accessed 13 April 2003]; 'Genealogy (Tracing Roots)', at *NativeWeb Resources*, available on: http://www.nativeweb.org/resources/genealogy_tracing_roots/ [accessed 13 April 2003].

mainstream society. The feeling was especially powerful for those displeased with certain aspects of American politics. This motivation has been particularly resonant in Arab America (2003: 6-7).

Revealingly, an e-mail from a late-generation Lebanese American to a Lebanese genealogical researcher states:

[Y]our information has already brought our family closer together. [We] have had a number of conversations about the genealogy and are very excited. I also managed to locate a couple more of my cousins and as it turns out, one of my cousins was trying to find out how to get in touch with my Dad. I also had a nice conversation with [my cousin,] who was feeling extremely alone and did not know how to contact most of her cousins. Connecting our families and understanding our past is bringing healing to all of us (email to webmaster at Shamas.org, 4 April 2003).

Despite their initial communal solidarity, Lebanese Americans were a collective of sectarian groups with underlying allegiances to issues important in their country of origin. As ties between the diaspora and Lebanon increased, so did the salience of Lebanese issues. As Salaita points out:

The reclamation or recovery of an Arab American identity is in many ways analogous to the social trajectories of other ethnic groups, and can therefore be considered typical of modern American acculturation and deculturation. And yet international relations have played a prominent role in the construction and consolidation of Arab America as a social and political unit (Salaita, 2003: 4).

Political events in the Middle East, including the Maronite-condoned Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, affected sectarian relations among Christians in Lebanon, particularly between pro-Western Maronite Catholics in the mountain and Beirut and 'Arabized' Orthodox in the South and the Beqaa Valley. As explained in the following section, the inherent emphasis on village- and family-based ties in Lebanese websites worked to transfer sectarian ideologies into the Oklahoma diaspora, and consequently, in the mid-1980s, evidence of a nascent split in Lebanese Oklahoman identity emerged. In oral histories, family websites, and unpublished and published family and church histories, immigrants and descendants from Jdeideh identified themselves as having not a 'Phoenician' identity, but rather an Arab ancestry derived from pre-Islamic Arab rulers, the Ghassanids.

Lebanese-based Websites: Renegotiating Shared Identities

As Peleikas writes, the Lebanese village functions as what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. At home and abroad, Lebanese use various forms and media, including the Internet, to express nostalgia 'for the village.' Yet as Peleikas points out:

[D]iscourses on the village cannot be understood solely in the context of people's personal lives, in their yearning for a place of origin and a childhood in the face of migration, displacement and alienation from lost life-worlds, but also must be analysed in that of disparate political, economic and social interests and power struggles (Peleikas, 2003: 49).

In a study of Internet-use by a multi-confessional village, Joun, in the Lebanese Shuf, Peleikas argues that village-based websites serve a dual function: first, they preserve family connections and serve as a means for people to 'live family relations' in a 'globalized' world; second, by attracting migrants' attention, they are a political and economic strategy that serves local interests (ibid: 50).

In April 1998, two years after the emergence of Lebanese-based websites, and two years prior to Jdeideh's independence from Israel, the first Jdeidet, Marjeyoun website was created. Including the requisite 'directory' for postings by dispersed village inhabitants, the site replicates other Lebanese-based sites in that it seeks to compile a list of community members outside of the area. Located in the site's directory under the name Julio Hesham of Ottawa, Canada, is the stunning comment, 'I was born in 1983. I helped my dad create this page, which means a lot to him.'²³

23 *Jdeidet, Marjeyoun*, available on: <http://www.marjeyoun.cjb.net> [accessed 6 July 2000].

According to Julio's father:

Julio is my son and he created this site when he was 14. He maintained it for a couple of months and I developed it after I started to be knowledgeable and familiar with the Internet. Our website is used by Marjeyounis world wide [...] I am always in contact with Marjeyoun, I have lots of friends there and my sister and her family still live in our family home. My last trip was in 1997 with my kids for their first time. They loved it and want to go again. My daughter did and is planning on going this summer (email interview, 4 January 2004).

This forum for interaction among Marjeyounis in Beirut and the diaspora allowed for an outpouring of identification with Marjeyouni heritage and cultural awareness. For instance, comments from the diaspora asserted: 'My grandparents were both Lebanese immigrants. I am proud of my heritage', and 'My fondest desire is to be able to visit Jdeidet someday.'²⁴ The quest for ancestral information was a common theme on the Marjeyoun website, and through the comment boards and directory, Lebanese in the diaspora exchanged family information and worked to piece together their ancestors' pasts. Links to family websites were posted to the Marjeyoun website in 1998 and 1999, sites which detail the histories and accomplishments of migrants and their families. Marjeyounis in Beirut, recent migrants, and late-generation New World descendants contributed to the website; the first postings by Jdeidet, Marjeyounis in South Lebanon do not appear until after the end of Israeli occupation.

Notably, several of the family websites linked to the Marjeyoun website heavily emphasize an Arab Ghassanid ancestry. According to posted family histories, in the third century AD, a tribe of Yemenite Arabs migrated to the Damascus area, stopping at a spring along the way. Having spent time at this spring, they derived their name from it and were known as the Ghassanids. After arriving in the area, they converted to Orthodox Christianity and supplanted pre-existing Christian tribes to become the rulers of western Syria. The Ghassanids emulated Byzantine culture and modified it with Arab influences. In the 600s, they fought as allies with the Byzantium armies and attempted to repel Muslim Arab invasions from the greater Arabian Desert. After defeat at the Battle of Yarmuk, many Ghassanids converted to Islam. However, a core group retreated into the mountains of South Lebanon and founded Jdeidet, Marjeyoun. The Muslims subsequently occupied the former Ghassanid capital of Damascus and acquired the existing Arab culture, which provided the underpinnings for the ensuing development of high Arab culture.²⁵

In relating the Ghassanid ancestry, certain factors are emphasized by Marjeyouni-descendants. These include that the Ghassanid were the first Arab Christians: 'The Moslem historian(s) used to call them the Christian Arab, and this goes back to the year 200 AD. Therefore and according to Arabic historians, we have come from the Christian stock from the beginning of time, and we have kept our faith in spite of the Moslem invasion of the Middle East in 637 A.D.'²⁶ Further, the Marjeyounis stress that they remain part of the Arab race, kinfolk to their Muslim brethren: '[The Gebaras] are Moslems and Christians who are cousins and branched out of one ancestor.'²⁷ These Orthodox Christians also emphasize the Ghassanid connection with Constantinople, that Benu Ghassan was appointed 'Lord of all Syria' by Emperor Justinian' (ibid). Each point directly contradicts the tenets of Lebanese Phoenicianism, which attributes Lebanese Christian heritage to an ancient, non-Arab (Western) Mediterranean empire.

The earliest writings of the original Lebanese Orthodox immigrants in Oklahoma make no reference to a Ghassanid identity. As late as 1981 and 1984, studies of the St. Elijah congregation and the Lebanese Oklahoman community do not make reference to the Ghassanid identity. However, the first known written reference by a Marjeyouni in Oklahoma to a Ghassanid identity is a privately published family history written by Alex Massad in 1987—several years after the arrival at St. Elijah in Oklahoma City of Father Constantine Nasr and politicized immigrants from the Middle East.

24 Ibid.

25 *The Horany Family Website*, available on: <http://www.texaspump.com/horany/horanyfamily.htm> [accessed 24 June 2000].

26 <http://www.texaspump.com/horany/horanyfamily.htm> [accessed 17 August 2000].

27 *The History and Family Tree of the Gebaras*, available on: <http://www.gebara.cjb.net> [accessed 4 April 2000]

Significantly, numerous contemporary writings, postings on Internet comment boards, and family websites since then have heavily emphasized this Ghassanid identity.²⁸ As Desbamita Roychowdhury points out of Internet ethnic portals and the construction of ethnic community, immigrants work via various means to ‘reconstruct or reinvent not only their traditions but their political claims to territory and histories from which they have been displaced’ (2000).

Meanwhile, in 1998, the first Catholic Maronite Mission was formed in Oklahoma in Tulsa. St. Ephraim’s Mission sought to wrest a separate identity from the Roman Catholic Church by holding services in ancient Syriac and Arabic. Newsletters and websites linked Maronite Oklahomans to a central organization of Maronite Americans in order to ‘solidify Maronite identity’ (Tulsa Maronite News 2, 1999).²⁹ Such literature stressed Maronite Christian legitimacy and historical primacy: ‘The Aramaic language, used in the liturgy, is the same language Jesus spoke during his earthly life and ministry’ (ibid). It also promoted Maronite-Judeo relations:

The Maronite spirituality, liturgy, and traditions come from Antioch-Edessa Syria. In Antioch [the Catholic traditions] remained Jewish [...] Many people forget or do not realize that Christianity came from Judaism. Evidence from archeological studies of early Maronite church buildings show that they had earlier been synagogues. To this day, the Maronite Church retains its Jewish roots more than any other Catholic rite (ibid).

At the July 2000 convention of Southern Federation of Syrian-Lebanese Clubs, an organized Maronite presence, including displayed church banners and the distribution of Maronite literature, is reported to have dichotomized Lebanese-Oklahoman interactions between ‘Orthodox’ and ‘Maronite.’ Concurrently, contact between Marjeyouni Orthodox in Oklahoma and Jdeideh began to increase at an unprecedented rate due to the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Internet Access in Marjeyoun: Village Identity and Post-occupation Development

Upon Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in May 2000, local Marjeyounis were finally able to access the international conversations transpiring via the Marjeyoun website regarding their own lived-in geography. They entered the Marjeyoun networks with a cynicism that post-Occupation Jdeideh would not enjoy much government-sponsored redevelopment. As described below, southern Christian Lebanese at the time considered existing regional development projects south of Beirut to be a) deeply affected by the opaque mechanisms of government cronyism, and b) largely oriented to non-Christian areas. Such suspicions, which deepened a local sense of dependence on the outside for reconstruction efforts, were not entirely unfounded.

A 1999 newsletter by the Post-war Reconstruction & Development Unit (PRDU) at the University of York, UK, details the establishment of a consortium of consultants to prepare a regional socio-economic development program for southern Lebanon. At the request of the post-Taifa Lebanese government and in conjunction with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the consortium—including *L’Institut d’Aménagement et d’Urbanisme de la Région d’Ile-de-France* (IAURIF), Paris; Team International, Beirut; CRI (Consulting and Research Institute), Beirut; ECODIT, Washington; and PRDU—put forward a ten-year development program to follow Israeli withdrawal

28 For e.g., see *Jdeidet, Marjeyoun*, available on: <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Valley/3442/>; *Ghareeb-Debakay-Missad Family Page*, available on: <http://familytreemaker.com/users/g/h/a/Donald-L-Ghareeb/>; *The History and Family Tree of the Gebaras*, available on: <http://www.gebara.cjb.net/>; *The Horany Family Website*, available on: <http://www.texaspump.com/horany/horanyfamily.htm>.

29 *Tulsa Maronite News 2*, no 6 (November/December 1999), available on: <http://members.aol.com/maronites/myhomepage/index.html> [accessed 12 April 2000].

from the region. The consortium report also included two versions of a three-year program based on either a total Israeli withdrawal or continued conflict (see, York University Newsletter, 1999: 1).³⁰

In order to prepare its contribution to the program report, PRDU sent a team of staff, students, and associates to Lebanon in 1998. The team met with Lebanese academics and practitioners involved in redevelopment projects, and then visited southern Lebanon, including reconstruction projects in Saida and Tyre. Notably, the project tours were sponsored by two groups: 1) the Hariri Foundation, and 2) Jihad Al Bina, the civilian branch of Hezbollah—redevelopment programs concentrated in primarily Sunni and Shiite areas (ibid).

Regarding its contribution to the consortium's report, a section entitled 'Directory of Funding Sources', PRDU's newsletter states:

This study will be particularly significant during the implementation of programmes, as resource mobilisation and its effective allocation for recovery is one of the most decisive elements in the formulation of a reconstruction strategy. Experience shows that if the resource mobilisation is not tackled efficiently and effectively, it can result in long delays in reconstruction, duplication of effort and ultimately the waste of badly needed resources. Therefore in parallel to the process of designing rehabilitation programmes, it is essential to identify the donor and implementing agencies which may be involved in the development of southern Lebanon (ibid, 4).

Hence, it was PRDU's pragmatic suggestion that, upon Israeli withdrawal, resources for reconstruction should be mobilized according to already existing development networks in the South. The newsletter also points out the area's 'great' potential for long-term sustainable development in 'the Lebanese diaspora who are still concerned with the destiny of the region' (ibid).

Additionally, in a paper presented at 'South Lebanon: Urban Challenge in the Era of Liberation'—an April 2000 conference organized by Beirut Arab University, the Hariri Foundation, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)—ESCWA's first human settlements officer Riadh Tappuni reported that development in South Lebanon was currently being held back by: a) a lack of contribution from the international donor community, who seemed 'to have been holding back funds until a stable peace is assured and tension along the blue line ceases;' b) a lack of coordinated effort among the government organizations working in the South—including the Council of the South, the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), and the High Relief Commission (HRC)—and the eight local NGOs with prominent roles, including Syrian-backed Amal and the Hariri Foundation; and c) a lack of transparency among local NGOS, state organizations like the Council of the South and CDR, and other groups working in the South (ibid, 7).

Significantly, upon the liberation of the 'security belt', Prime Minister Salim Hoss, whose political platform was to eliminate the 'corruption' of the previous Hariri government, visited the South to reassure locals of the government's intention to establish development projects. However, while the government provided this message of reassurance in Shiite, Sunni, and Druze areas, in predominantly Christian areas Hoss's message was that those townspeople who had departed for Israel 'should return. The judiciary is just and transparent and will do injustice to no one' (*The Daily Star*, 29 May 2000a). Another government official assured Christians, 'I will ensure the government treats you like a forgiving mother' (*The Daily Star*, 29 May 2000b). The *Daily Star* reported meetings between Shiite leaders and local Christian leaders at which Shiite leaders 'reassured them that relationships with Christians dated to ancient times, and promised to remain by their side.' Shiite leaders urged 'former Israeli-allied militiamen who left to Israel to turn themselves in to the government, adding that the judiciary would give them a fair trial' (ibid). Thus, rather than privileging a message of reconstruction and development in Christian dominated areas, Lebanese leaders promoted sectarian unity and political forgiveness of Christians.

Yet Marjeyounis did not wait for help from the government. Upon the withdrawal of Israeli troops, young 'techniks' in Jdeidet, many who had connections with UNIFIL soldiers in Ibn Al-Saki,

30 'Consultancy for Southern Lebanon Successfully Completed', in: *Revival: The Newsletter of the Post-War Reconstruction & Development Unit, at the University of York*: 11 (July 1999), available on: <http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/poli/revival/rev11.pdf>

managed to surreptitiously access the Internet. One teen-age male interviewee writes: 'It was kind of illegal. The connection was via cables & that is forbidden here. We had some internet cafes & some people who put internet in their houses. At that time the presence of the lebanese army in marjeyoun was unnoticeable' (email interview, 1 January 2004). Additionally, at least one shop in Jdeideh provided access to Internet via satellite, although as another interviewee reports, 'Once in the internet café in the souk they told me they had internet satellite but they could not activate it because it needs a pin code that costs a lot. Then I noticed the satellite was not very much legal & did not ask them more, because I didn't know the degree of accuracy in their explanation' (email interview, 3 January 2004).

During the summer of 2000, the Canadian-created Marjeyoun.cjb.net was transformed into a public forum for discussions between newly-liberated Marjeyounis in the South and those overseas. Locals quickly realized the utility of the website to make contact with and appeal to the diaspora for financial assistance, and by June, a page was added to the website that provided bank details and an address for Lebanese migrants and their descendants to send donations to the Marjeyoun Association—the closest thing the village had to a governing body. Many Marjeyouni migrants and their descendants traveled to Jdeideh throughout the summer of 2000, some for the first time in 25 years, and the Marjeyouni Association appealed to these travelers on the website to donate money while in Marjeyoun, explaining 'lots of people were working in Israel, that is why we are facing this problem [financial hardship] now.'³¹ The coordinator of the 'Marjeyouni Appeal' posted a description of South Lebanon, explaining the dire situation of freed Jdeideh: 'Every house is in need of repair [...] I suggest a box to be put in the church for this purpose, and the Archbishop will be in charge of distributing the money to the needy. I hope that my suggestions will be read by all the people from Marjeyoun.'³² Dozens of Lebanese Canadians and Lebanese Americans posted positive responses on the site and publicly dedicated funds. As one Midwest US descendant wrote: 'God bless our town.'

Unfortunately, however, due to the prevalence of cell phones and means of Internet connection via cables, Marjeyounis did not initially push the government for telecommunication redevelopment. A report written by Information International Research Consultants entitled 'Post-Withdrawal Priorities and Needs: South Lebanon Workshop', describes a workshop for southern opinion leaders convened on February 16, 2001 under the auspices of the Embassy of the Royal Netherlands. Indicating the various needs of the South, the report details insufficient water supplies, erratic power, lack of a functional sewage network, landmines, lack of equipping and staffing of government hospitals, and a paucity of qualified teachers and modern equipment for education. It continues:

The questionnaire, the discussions and the earlier surveys have underlined unwavering attachment of southerners to their land, and although the developmental needs are numerous, they are largely realistic, practical and modest [...] the area suffers from severe shortages in basic services [...] as well as a severely depleted infrastructure and distorted environment (3).

The report further states, 'there is a widespread sense of disappointment over the perceived reluctance of the Lebanese government, foreign countries as well as local and international NGOs to help resuscitate the South in the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal'(6). Disappointment at a lack of reconstruction, coupled with the reality of other more pressing needs, provides context for the report's assertion that 'the liberated areas have no network for land telephones, but this [...] does not seem to worry the population, which has become used to getting by with cellular telephones'(14).

In 2002, access to cable internet was 'cut off' in Marjeyoun, although some interviewees report intermittent satellite access 'taking reception from another satellite in Nabatieh.' Thus, still lacking landline telephony, Marjeyounis continued to keep in contact with Beirut and the diaspora via 'third-generation' cellular telephones. Able to send and receive phone calls, text messages, and email; they maintained interpersonal contact with Beirut and overseas. Significantly, in the autumn of 2002, the

31 *Marjeyoun Association*, available on: <http://www.Marjeyoun.cjb.net/fundraising> [accessed 22 August 2000].

32 *Jdeidet, Marjeyoun*, available on: <http://www.Marjeyoun.cjb.net> [accessed 22 August 2000].

St. Elijah congregation in Oklahoma City and its sister Orthodox Marjeyouni congregation in Wichita, Kansas each pledged to raise \$50,000 for projects in Marjeyoun, including funding the hospital opened in the 1950s by Dr. Michael Shadid. The International Orthodox Charity Commission pledged to match their funds (author's notes, St. Elijah elders meeting, 2 November 2002).

Finally, during the summer of 2003, landlines were established in Marjeyoun, 'legal and local as those in the other places in Lebanon', as one interviewee writes. However, whereas 'cable connection internet was kind of cheap, now it's really costly, that's why we use the internet for just 1 or 2 hours per day, where we used to spend all of the day before on the cable connection.' Yet the interviewee goes on to point out the general cost/benefit analysis of such communications for local Marjeyounis:

Due to the internet, we were able to keep in contact with many people who left Marjeyoun, family & friends, not just that we've had contact with people especially elder ones who left Lebanon long time ago & made other countries their new homes. Thus we were able to know their news & make some visit Marjeyoun again (email interview, 5 January 2004).

As of January 2004, the Marjeyoun.cjb.net homepage contained a letter from the Mayor thanking various private contributors who have donated money for redevelopment projects. More than two dozen photos of the town were posted, as well as a computer-generated image of plans for redevelopment. Local municipal council leaders were listed, as well as the number of votes they received in the 2002 elections; also listed were the votes counted for those who ran and did not win. The web-master had just posted a link to a Lebanese government document stating that any Lebanese male national who has been abroad for more than five years will be forgiven his army service upon return to Lebanon. Posted press articles described the 'South still waiting for fruits of liberty' and the Marjeyoun hospital's 'funding crisis.'

Intermingled with transparent local governance on marjeyoun.cjb.net are pages devoted to transmission of cultural information: a comment-board of chatter and smiley-face icons exchanged between Lebanese-descended adolescents; 'Sity's kitchen' with the traditional Arabic recipes of several local women posted in both Arabic and English; pictures of elaborate Marjeyoun fund-raisers held overseas; real estate listings; Marjeyouni resumes and CVs; and announcements of weddings, births, deaths, promotions and the achievements of Marjeyounis at home and abroad. As Pelaikas points out, Lebanese village websites reinvigorate memory for both social and political reasons.

Conclusion

International communication between Marjeyounis in Jdeideh and 'outside' constantly reinvigorate shared religious- and village-based ties. In the process, sectarianism, cultural myths and other strategic identity processes are negotiated and re-imagined in terms of these communicative acts, as well as others.³³ Translocal 'power' therefore shifts, relocates, and, over *longue-durée*, is rendered generally ambivalent. As Karim H. Karim (2003) asserts, the media of diaspora constitute neither 'globalisation from above' nor 'globalisation from below' but a complex hybrid of both.

In the short term, however, translocal forces are not so benign. Lebanese Christians constitute a dwindling minority in southern Lebanon. Whether their communal survival will depend on agents who push a pro-Western (Maronite dominated) political system in Lebanon, or the assertion of a pro-Arab identity that can politically unite eastern Christians with other area Arabs, is of secondary importance to how both of these political forces affect local cultural identities and social and political hierarchies.

During the summer of 2002, I traveled to Jdeidet, Marjeyoun, a place that my great-grandfather long ago left and that neither my grandfather nor father have ever been. I walked up to the door of my ancestral home unannounced and, equipped with family information gleaned through Internet research and emails from

33 As James Tyner and Olaf Kuhlke (2000) demonstrate in their study of the Internet and Filipinos, social networking includes intra-diasporic, inter-diasporic, diaspora-host, and diaspora-homeland exchanges.

distant relatives, I asserted myself to be a relative of the inhabitants. Oddly enough, they accepted me. An elderly family member was sent for to facilitate our discussions of family history. The younger family members, having been disinterested in family connections, had never visited the Marjeyoun or family websites. The older gentleman was not computer literate, and toward the end of our conversation he stated:

Yes, the Shammass family used to be big. But over the years, everyone left, everyone [...] They went to France, to Canada, Mexico, they went to Brazil, and they went to America. Now we are only a few people still here, and those who stayed had to work for the Israelis, or for the southern Army [the SLA]. We had to eat, to survive. The house has no roof; we must think where do we get a roof? So now, who are we? Our family is very small here. Who are we? Who were we? No one in the family left here in Marjeyoun knows. But you come back, you tell us who our family is, where they are, the great things they have done, you tell us even who our family was, stories about our ancestors and our neighbors we did not know ourselves! Yes, you are right. Zelpha Sukkereia's family was from Rushaya, but I forgot! We forgot! Now you come back and tell us who we are. And we are here! It is sad, very sad. We have missed out on so much.

Thus, re-discovered family histories, similar to re-discovered Ghassanid roots, constitute what Mark Poster describes as a 'new ethnicity'—a historically emergent identity that bears the stamp of transnational, globalizing forces (Poster, 2001).

An ideological struggle is being waged on Lebanese websites to define the discourse surrounding Lebanon's precarious future. Lebanese Maronites and other associated groups call for the re-emergence of a Christian-dominated Lebanon, free of Syrian influence, while other, pro-Arab movements seek Lebanon's coalescence into an egalitarian collective of sectarian groups supporting a wider, pan-Arab cause.³⁴ As a result of increased contact with Lebanese-based websites, previously 'Americanized' immigrants and their descendants adopt discrete sectarian-based biases regarding Lebanon's political future (Shamas, 2003).³⁵ The implications of such rhetoric for both local Lebanese and Lebanese-Americans must be considered in light of 1) the capital-based machinations of the Internet search engines that funnel Lebanese into Lebanese-based portals and websites, and 2) the funding of some websites calling for a 'Free Lebanon' by groups with Zionist interests (ibid).

Also significant to transnational processes are post 9/11 US foreign policies and Arab-related domestic affairs. While writing this paper, I explained my research to a Lebanese American friend descended from Marjeyoun who spent her early childhood in Beirut. During the 1980s, her family came to the US with nothing but the suitcases they could carry. Now a law student in Washington, DC and active with the Arab American lobby, she occasionally returns to Beirut. Her father returns frequently. His sister remains in Marjeyoun and did throughout the occupation, although for a significant portion of time she lived outside the family home, as it was forcibly inhabited by Southern Lebanese and/or Israeli soldiers. In the summer of 2000, my friend's father returned to Jdeideh for the first time in twenty-five years. His family home was badly damaged, and he and his brother are gradually arranging its repair. My friend has returned once, in the winter of 2001, when the village was still a wreck and cable lines were being tapped illegally. I asked her opinion as to whether communication networks between Marjeyoun and Marjeyouni Americans constitute an instance of 'globalisation from above' or 'below.' At my suggestion that it might be 'top-down' or even an ambivalent process, she countered:

When you say 'globalisation from below', I think of 'grassroots', which has a very broad meaning. 'Grassroots' means that people are empowered because they do things for themselves. AND because nobody's doing it for them ...When you mention 'globalisation from below', I think of the Iraqi taxi driver who used Internet illegally to set up a blogspot. He used the technology to write about what he saw and experienced daily. *That's* grassroots. The result is that he projects into the mainstream what he faces everyday. *That's* grassroots. Remember when you stayed with my family in Beirut and we used the Internet to call the US? That was 'illegal.' That's how my cousin

34 See e.g. *The World Lebanese Cultural Union*, at: <http://www.wlcu.com> and, <http://www.shoofimafi.com> for examples of both scenarios.

35 Based on surveys and interviews of Lebanese-Oklahomans, February-April 2003.

stayed in touch with my dad for years. The Lebanese have always tapped into technology and used it 'illegally' before the technology was institutionalized and offered for profit. Is there a better means to do it? Just look at how our [the US] two-party system swallows up issues. A subgroup only becomes a social movement when it presents itself to major movements so that [the major movements] incorporate their ideas. For the Lebanese, presenting a unified front, getting information out there, appealing to the West as the religiously-pluralistic 'democratic' model they're looking for ... that's 'grassroots', no matter how they obtain the technology.

According to Salaita, 9/11 'dramatically altered' Arab American reality as Arab Americans

evolved from invisible to glaringly conspicuous (whether or not the conspicuousness was welcomed) [...] much of the intellectual energy in the Arab American community went into public relations and the protection of civil liberties [...and] the implications and consequences in question are just now starting to develop into analyzable phenomenon (2003: 8).

In this light, for Orthodox Marjeyounis seeking aid via the donations and political support of Lebanese Americans, reconstruction must be read contrapuntally as an imperialist force from above. In addition to corrupt Lebanese elites and exploitative telecommunication multinationals, Jdeidet, Marjeyounis must navigate the oppressive intricacies of post 9/11 Arab American politics and thus present themselves in an 'acceptable' manner. Otherwise, there is little chance Lebanese Americans will respond. Again, despite the potentials for exchange fostered by advancing communication technologies, regional and international politics are dictating the nature of translocal Lebanese contact. Apparently, when groups endure harsh measures of ethnic and religious-based oppression, the 'post-modern' impulse to maintain a multiplicity of voices and identities falls wayside to political and economic pressures.

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