

Carlos Eddé to RN: We need an alliance of moderates

Interview: Right to Nonviolence Board Member



You are political heir of your uncle Raymond Eddé – known as the ‘conscience of Lebanon’ – who was leader of the Lebanese National Bloc. You have graciously accepted to join the Board of [Right to Nonviolence](#); we are extremely honored to have you working with us and thank you again for taking the time to speak with us today. [\[1\]](#)

Q. On the one hand you promote modernity in Lebanon, on the other you came to this position by way of succession, catapulted into the political leadership of Lebanon. Isn't there a contradiction?

Absolutely, but then Lebanon is a country full of contradictions. Actually, when my uncle died, I was living in Brazil, working in the private sector, and had never thought of getting involved in politics. Raymond Eddé had been living away from Lebanon for 24 years. He had the dubious honor of having been the first personality that the Syrian regime tried to eliminate in 1976. He escaped three attempts against his life being injured on each occasion. Upon his death, I was elected to lead the party by the assembly composed of 129 members, by a majority of 128 to 1. So, as you see, nepotism is doing very well indeed. At their insistence I accepted for a transitional period to help out, but one has to always be careful for what one signs on for in Lebanon. I stayed because I believe that Lebanon needs a contrarian approach to its politics. The challenges and the importance of what is at stake –sovereignty, independence, human rights, democracy, dignity, peace – made it difficult to walk away from it all.

Q. Before we move on, you recount a delightful story that took place in the family home in 1943 that offers some contextual insight to the ‘shifting alliances’ of more recent times in Lebanon. Would you share the story with our readers?

It is one of our best family tales: The result of the Lebanese parliamentary elections of 1943 secured a majority of MPs in favor of Emile Eddé in the coming elections for President of the Republic. The house was full of politicians, businessmen and notables, who as always wanted to be on the winning side. However, and as it has been the case since, the election of a Lebanese president has more to do with external factors and in 1943 Lebanon was occupied by the British army even though civil administration was still under the supervision of the French. The English minister to Syria and Lebanon, Sir Edward Spears, was keen to oust the French and establish an Arab Federation under the influence of the British government and disapproved of Emile Eddé who was suspicious of the British intent. One day, when the house was packed, information came discreetly that Great Britain; represented by General Spears, would refuse to recognize the election of Emile Eddé. The first to know left discreetly, then the others started noticing and soon the word was out so rapidly that in less than fifteen minutes, the house was empty. My father told me that the well-wishers were almost storming the door, and it was very strange to see grown-up men racing each other in order not to be the last to reach the house of the future President Bechara el-Khoury, who lived 400 meters away. The same terms used earlier to flatter Emile Eddé were now being used for Bechara el-Khoury. Those who appeared to have been the closest to Emile Eddé were those who became the most hostile to him later. Some departed so quickly that they left behind their coats and hats and did not have the courage to come back out of fear of being seen entering the house of Emile Eddé, who had the elegance of discreetly sending them back to their owners.

Q. On the issue of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the STL, the competing narratives are widely divergent. Briefly how would you deconstruct the main argument of those who have steadfastly opposed the process?

Hezbollah and consequently all its allies, have developed a theory that the STL is “a plot by US and Israel to divide Lebanon and weaken those who oppose Zionism, that it is a choice between security and justice, and that it has been rigged to serve political objectives”. I believe it was Benjamin Franklin who said that if you have to choose security at the expense of justice, you end up having neither. When you are being accused you have the following choices for defense: either you prove that you are innocent by proving that you cannot have done it and that the evidence against you is wrong, or you have to discredit the tribunal, and refuse to collaborate. The fact that they chose the latter does not say much about innocence. Besides, one has to remember that at

the time of the assassination of Hariri, Lebanon was suffocated by the omnipresence of the Syrian *mokhabarat*, the innumerable Lebanese security services, the very efficient Hezbollah intelligence, *and* all the informants running around. Not one phone, email or communication was beyond their control. The fact that an assassination on that scale took place on their watch without their involvement is beyond comprehension, and that they are not only incapable of bringing to light any shred of evidence of someone else's guilt, much worse, that they have systematically tried to eliminate evidence or have refused to conduct any investigation in the aftermath, is, to say the least, highly suspicious. I have faith in independent justice and in the notion that every accused is innocent until proven otherwise, but I think the usual suspects have an uphill battle to prove their innocence.

Q. Setting aside for a moment the issue of whether there will ultimately be convictions in The Hague, is the STL of symbolic or practical importance or both?

The STL was put in place because it is impossible to have an investigation and a fair trial in Lebanon, when you have an organization like Hezbollah, armed to the teeth, which refuses to recognize the authority of Lebanon or the results of its election, threatening every single institution, and public servant. Lebanon is hostage to Hezbollah and those who control it. The STL is the best thing that has happened to Lebanon, as long as you are, of course, on the side of true independent justice and want to see the end of terrorism and impunity. If we stay the course, accept to pay the heavy price and are not abandoned by the international community for the sake of a regional bargain, justice will prevail, and it will create a new political culture. Most of all it will be a clear message to tyrants and would be dictators that the days of impunity are over.

Q. It is an extraordinary time of upheaval in the Middle East and yet Lebanon has been notably absent – with the exception of a few voices including your own who have dared to speak out for human rights in Syria amidst the ‘deafening silence’ of the majority – in practically every way. To what do you primarily attribute this to, fear, indifference, the tacit acknowledgement that the future will be determined elsewhere so a collective wait to see ‘where to leave one’s coat and hat’?

Among those who oppose the Syrian intervention in Lebanon, some are silent because they fear – and may be right to do so – a nasty reaction from the long arm of the regime in Lebanon. Others prefer the “wait and see” attitude while many think it is counterproductive to make a stand as it might antagonize uselessly the regime and give it an excuse to claim that the Syrian opposition is nothing else than an instrument of foreign intervention. As for me, my attitude toward the repression of Syrian civilians by a totalitarian regime is no different than it would be for any other similar case in the world, except that it is closer to home, and I have more sympathies towards our “next door neighbor”. But injustice is injustice in whatever shape or color, and I really believe in the idea of Edmund Burke that “all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing”. I also think that of sins, the ones made by omission are the worst because they are often associated with a dose of cowardice or at best selfishness. And often it doesn't take much to make a difference. To say nothing is in a way to condone.

Q. You a ‘founding father’ of the Cedar Revolution, a broad movement mobilized around two themes – a rejection of violence and a demand for political accountability^[2] – or more simply the truth. The ideological pillars of the revolution have been situated in the annual addresses between 1996 and 2003 of former USJ Rector Sélim Abou.^[3] Are there other Lebanese or Arab writers you would acknowledge in terms of intellectual debt?

Actually the main unifying and driving factor of that movement was the wish to see the Syrian army leave Lebanon, and to end their control on almost every aspect of life in Lebanon. And their departure would be the pre-condition to all other demands. Obviously Chibli Mallat has been for a long time an important writer as well as activist on the issues to which you refer. There are so many others who daily voiced their protest so I would hate to name only a few. However, those who stand out are Samir Kassir and Gebran Tueini who paid the ultimate price for defending the right for justice and independence.

Q. In a speech before the European Parliament in Strasbourg you called March 14 the alliance for “.....liberalism, modernism, pluralism and freedom”. Could you comment on the specific failure to translate its universal, humanist principles into an appealing and sustained narrative and to forge an identify separate from personalities?

What I meant then and now is that Lebanese are politically divided into two main options: The March 8 front that is dominated by Hezbollah, who are controlled by two dictatorships, Syria and the theocratic Republic of Iran, which serve as role model to those who are in that camp. The other option, that of the March 14 alliance wants a country in which the results of free elections are not threatened by an armed militia, where you don't tip the majority by assassinating MPs or threatening them, and where the government wants to comply with the charter of the United Nations.

Having said that, one has to remember that this alliance is composed of very different groups each with a different outlook, history, and track record. We do not necessarily agree on how to achieve or how to prioritize these objectives. Again bear in mind that the main objective was and is to end the disruptive Assad and Iranian influences in Lebanon. As for reasons for failure to translate its universal, humanist principles into an appealing and sustained movement, many participants in the movement – among which is the main actor of the alliance, the one that carries the bigger financial and numerical weight – have been unable to transform this struggle into an effective and modern organization. Being a heterogeneous group is not easy. I think that the main failures are: (1) an inability to use efficient means to maintain a level of mobilization commensurate with that of our adversaries, (2) a pattern of reacting to events instead of being proactive, (3) a tendency to focus on short rather than long-term considerations in making decisions leading to many mistakes, and (4) a habit of ‘shooting oneself in the foot’ as a result of actions driven by the petty interests of certain partners.

Q. You warn against the danger in an ‘alliance of minorities’in trying to contain the majority with minorities, mobilizing the people of these communities with an extremist discourse based on fear and hatred”. Do you consider fear or hatred has been the predominantly compelling narrative used in Lebanon to garner/sustain support for the improbable partnership that is now the ruling ‘majority’?

The common denominators of all societies in this part of the world are that we cherish our past and love to cultivate past grudges, even if it means to alienate the prospects of a better future. We really love to hate someone and to blame him for our failures or to justify our wrongdoings.

What kind of social order do we hope for Lebanon or the region? Do we want one that integrates people or one that is divisive and segregates them? Some, among the minorities, believe that living together is impossible, that we have major different values and thus our own existence and way of life is therefore threatened by the Sunni majority. Without entering into the merit of such argument, we can assert the following: (1) the more you antagonize people, the more they will react to you; (2) anyway, it is unlikely that majorities can be contained in the long run; (3) minorities are not concentrated in one geographical place and thus it makes the argument for mini-states impossible without the kind of massacres that followed the partition of India; (4) majorities ruled by minorities are bound sooner or later to react and to win; and (5) politicians who think in terms of religious or ethnic differences tend to be intolerant and will incite their communities up to the point that it provokes their adversaries to adopt the same fanatical discourse with a similar kind of leaders. And then it will be the end of reasonableness and of moderate leaders. Everyone will pay the price, most of all the minorities. The real guarantees for minorities and the majority is the development of a political structure that integrates everyone while maintaining a certain degree of diversity. For that you must find leaders on all side who share a constructive vision of such a system and who can develop a conciliatory message that will attenuate past differences. What we really need is an alliance of the moderates.

Q. You have written that democracy for all its risks and weaknesses is the best system in that it allows for correction of errors. Is secularism a ‘precondition for democracy’ and if so how can this be reconciled with the Lebanese formula?

I am deeply secular and I believe that religion and politics can be an explosive mix. However my personal beliefs have to be tempered with realities, and how others, especially if they are much greater in number, wish for. The Lebanese National Bloc, has been, ever since the creation of Lebanon, pushing for increasing space for secular measures without using the term “secular”. For example, our party was the first to ask for a facultative civil marriage that would help integrate people of different confessions, unfortunately this, and many others, have been blocked so far.

Q. Lebanon has been called a consociational democracy with governance based on consensus among communal groups rather than majority rule in a ‘unique’ national pact driven by the political culture of elites or ‘Zoama’ based on “self-interests, inter-communal trade-offs within state institutions, and maintenance of their leadership based on ties of kinship and neighborhood.”^[4] This sounds remarkably similar to an alliance of minorities’ albeit one of status quo and stability rather than fear and hatred. Structurally weak by design, it is argued that the system is susceptible to both internal (non-traditional elites such as political parties break existing ‘codes’) and external disruptions (e.g. foreign support for domestic groups). Do you consider this a meaningful representation and how can this inform political activism today?

No it is not the same thing. The alliance of minorities is when smaller groups organize themselves to face a larger group. Democracy by consensus as is the case in Lebanon is an attempt to guarantee the rights of every community of different sizes, none of which has the majority, in trying to reach constant understanding. But when one group has arms and uses them for political leverage, you reach consensus by sticking one’s gun at the other fellow’s head and make him an offer he can’t refuse, and you have a new political order: ‘consensus’ through blackmail, threat and violence.

Q. The National Bloc has steadfastly opposed the electoral law of 1960; it is striking – if one revisits the draft law submitted to Parliament in 1959 by Raymond Eddé that called for a single voting constituency, expatriate voting/candidacy, formation of a special electoral oversight body amongst other changes – that with the exception of granting women the right to vote in 1952 scant progress has been achieved in over 50 years. You have been a persistent advocate for reform of the electoral law that you argue represents the major obstacle to democratic development in Lebanon. Are we ‘waiting for Godot’?

The 1960 electoral law, or rather the system that it is based on, that is to have multiple votes within open lists, is the single most important impediment to good representation, and thus sound political conduct. It is so absurd; it is very difficult to explain it to someone who is used to mature electoral systems. The 1960 law makes a mockery of any remote possibility of accountability; it imposes strange alliances based on electoral expediency rather than political agenda and negates any real possibility for those outside the system to reach parliament. And most of all it allows the elections of yes men who are accountable only to their leaders.

You immediately see the weaknesses in the existing law and procedural mechanisms by looking at some of the key advantages of the single seat constituency electoral system:

It is the most transparent, familiar, and readily understood in the world. Encouraging an open and competitive electoral process, single seat constituency avoids the most harmful effects – including election of non-representative officials – of a process of candidate selection orchestrated by dominant parties or groups. There are other advantages compared to the current system:

- Candidate competencies become increasingly important relative to money;
- Candidates are encouraged to concentrate efforts/time on issues and proposed programs rather than creating/defending alliances;
- Voters and candidates are more familiar with each other encouraging more responsible, better informed choices on Election Day;
- Voters are able to endorse a favorite candidate without coincident opportunity to ‘sell’ their vote for other ‘list’ candidates;
- Prepared voting ballot inside booth eliminates current incentive to vote a ‘ready-made’ list – rather than manually writing down names; and
- Voter participation, higher in a system where each vote is seen as making a difference, gives elected officials clearer mandate and greater credibility.

After elections, deputies are directly accountable to their constituency and at the same time accessible. With a popular mandate and constituency trust, elected officials can act freely and independently as needed especially in times of crises. At the same time, constituent needs and aspirations rather than the interests of the dominant party or group can be given priority. Procedurally, elections are carried out in two rounds: the first round offers a chance to any citizen with ambition to run for elections and permits allied parties to coordinate on a national scale. At this stage new faces can emerge, be elected and take part in the renewal of the political class. If no candidate obtains 50% +1 in the first round, a second round between the top two candidates would take place in a two weeks’ time during which debates can be held allowing voters clearer judgment in electing their representatives for the next 4-year parliamentary term.

Q. Christians across the region are fearful – marginalized – well aware of what has happened in Iraq, and more recently in Egypt, yet seem increasingly divided. A group of Syrian American Christians in Michigan openly and publicly support the Assad regime while a few days earlier Jesuit priests in Damascus issue a nuanced statement that acknowledges the protests as “efforts toward reform of political and social structures that seek to strengthen the state and are a legitimate

and recognized right for all.” Given the challenges and demographic realities, what type of constitutional mechanisms should minorities be seeking and how does this relate to the embedded confessionalism in the Lebanese system?

That Syrian American Christians should know better that coming up with such statements. As American they should uphold the values of what made the United States such a great country, everything that it stands for and all the sacrifices that were made in defense of liberty, at home and abroad. As Christians, how can they condone violence against unarmed civilians, and defend a corrupt and bloody regime. This is definitely not what Christianity is about. You have to treat people how you expect to be treated from a moral point of view. Pragmatically, you have to find peaceful solutions and not suppress the majority of the population. There are many ways of doing it, and unfortunately, the more costly the repression is, the less people are prone to discussion. I can understand the struggle of a secession movement even if I don't agree with it, but I cannot accept the dictatorship of the very few over the many. I fear for the minorities; all the minorities of the region will pay a high price for the will of these despots to stay in power. But it does not justify supporting violence and injustice.

Q. As the regional dynamic evolves in a way that potentially lessens Syrian and Iranian influence creating more space to address the democratic deficit in Lebanon, beyond the legal reforms needed, where do you envision the most immediate challenges?

So many problems have to be addressed other than those you mentioned: the public debt, the election law, the modernization of the state, the end of patronage, and the list is very long. But the challenges will be greater than others. First of all is to restore the people's confidence in each other and the lessening of sectarian tension. The greatest sin committed by March 8 politicians is that they used their weapons to terrorize their adversaries, they used violence to counter popular will and they used such a language of defiance that they have planted hatred in the mind of so many. They were not content to impose themselves on others, they humiliated them. One can overcome death; life goes on. But the humiliation and the sectarian hatred that they planted will have far reaching consequences. The other big problem is how to disarm Hezbollah. And finally the last issue is how to judge and condemn political assassins without the risk of a civil war.

Q. In October 2010, you wrote: If we lose this battle, we will see one day that this freedom, which we take for granted, will disappear. Then, to remain silent will not be nearly enough, one would have to be forced to publicly agree with despots.and then there will be no state of law and no independent judiciary to defend us. Faced with the unambiguous threat at hand, each of us may be forced to speak against our convictions and to always give in to the violence of the oppressor. Decidedly gloomy; are you more or less optimistic today?

Yes it was gloomy as the end of these violent regimes seemed so distant, and worst, some, like the Assad regime was being courted by many western countries. Besides, political violence seemed to pay off and one could murder and get away with it. The international tribunal in which we had so much faith in as an instrument for political change was taking so long that we were seeing dissent in our ranks and some, like Walid Joumblatt, were being scared into changing sides. Today, the Assad regime is on its way out of power, other Arab people revolted against authoritarian and corrupt regimes and the accusation act of the tribunal for Lebanon has finally come out. Things are looking up, but I fear that we will face dangerous days ahead.

Q. Noting a ‘unique regression’ in the country, Samir Kassir wrote in a book first published in 2004: “Having barely emerged from a war that tore its society apart and deprived the Arab world of one of its laboratories of modernity, Lebanon has in the fifteen intervening years forfeited most of the advantages that had long set it apart including an open, resourceful media.”[5] In parallel with the plurality of contemporary cultural (and including more recently media) centers in the region, dynamic political centers are emerging that have certainly eclipsed Lebanon. What does Lebanon have to offer the region to remain relevant?

The Lebanese and more specifically Lebanese Christians were the forerunners of the Arab cultural revival. We established modern schools based on western models earlier than others, Beirut was the main center in the Arab world for the publication of books and the press developed more rapidly, up to a point in that the main Egyptian press was in the hands of Lebanese. Obviously this could only be done because of the natural characteristic of each Lebanese to defend his freedom of expression, while other countries were either far behind Lebanon in terms of cultural development or political liberties. The civil war and the Syrian occupation were major setbacks for freedom, while in the meantime other places took on some of the features in which Lebanon excelled. Although Beirut will always have an important role to play in terms of cultural development, I don't think it will be as important as before. Globalization, mass education and the revolution in communication technology are strong factors for bridging any cultural difference. On the contrary, when we see that Lebanon is one of the worst countries in terms of internet development it makes you wonder what really happened.

Q. You are an avid student of history, are there any notable lessons from modern Lebanese history including the Cedar Revolution that can offer insight into today's morass?

There are several lessons that one can learn from the events that preceded, happened during, and followed the Cedar Revolution. Looking back at the last six years, the first and most notable lesson is to analyze the reasons why such a popular cause with such massive popular support was mismanaged. It is a great case study on how not to do things. Another great lesson for people in the region is the confirmation of the old saying that when there is a will there is a way, and political struggles are won by those who can mobilize better and for longer, that victory comes for those who stand up for themselves and are willing to take risks and can afford the casualties. It is a struggle of will and of ability to withstand casualties. History also teaches you that freedom is not free, on the contrary the price to acquire it and to keep it is very high.

[1] Interview with RN Director Trudi Hodges, Beirut, Lebanon, July 2011

[2] Chibli Mallat, *March 2221, Lebanon's Cedar Revolution*, Beirut, 2007

[3] Sélim Abou, *Freedoms: Cultural roots of the Cedar Revolution*, Beirut, 2005

[4] Ziad Majed, "What went wrong", The Majalla, June 14, 2011

[5] Samir Kassir, *Being Arab*, Beirut, 2006 (originally published as *Considérations sur le malheur arabe*)