

review



Books A nightmare at the museum

Big Idea Pankaj Mishra on India's neo-liberal admirers

Last Word King Abdullah, I'm ready for my close-up

Saloon Where time is actually money

Bring it Aoun

Michel Aoun's supporters revere him as a reforming hero, the only man able to repair a nation's woes – and he agrees. Elias Muhanna on the overlooked core of Lebanon's opposition

When General Michel Aoun, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), took to the stage at a campaign rally in south Beirut two Saturdays ago, a sea of citrus-coloured flags – the orange banners of his own party alongside the yellow standards of Hezbollah – churned before him. The choice of venue was strategic and symbolic. One kilometre to the west lay Haret Hreik, the mixed Christian and Shiite neighbourhood where Aoun was born in 1935. A kilometre to the east, perched in the foothills above Beirut, sat the presidential palace, the scene of his defeat at the hands of the Syrian Army during the civil war. And lying just to the south was al Dahiya, the epicentre of Hezbollah's military resistance, much of which was bombed to rubble by the Israeli Air Force in the summer of 2006.

The bespectacled general glared out over the lectern into the falling dusk. "Why do they reject the Third Republic?" he bellowed, referring to his rivals and invoking his party's ambitiously-titled electoral platform. "Is the strengthening of democracy and the creation of a secular state that safeguards equal rights for all of its citizens the reason for their rejection?"

Like his electoral ally Hassan Nasrallah, Michel Aoun is a deeply polarising figure in Lebanon. A Christian general who led the Lebanese Army against various adversaries during the civil war – including the PLO, Lebanese Christian militias and the Syrian Army – he has, since 2005, locked horns repeatedly with the March 14 coalition, an alliance of several parties backed by the United States that holds a slim majority in parliament. Now Aoun – whose career in politics stretches from his days as the leader of the resistance to Syria's occupation of Lebanon to his rapprochement with Damascus two decades later – is at the helm of an opposition campaign that vows to replace the corrupt structures of a troubled republic with a new order.

To his supporters, Aoun is a larger-than-life figure who has come to lead Lebanon's Christians – weak and divided since the end of the civil war – back to their former prominence, and to set the country on a path to national reconciliation and economic sustainability. To his detractors, "Napolaoun" is a power-obsessed megalomaniac who will do anything – even join forces with his former arch-nemesis Syria and its Lebanese allies – in order to fight his way to the top of Lebanon's political hierarchy.

If the opposition prevails on June 7, headlines around the world will read "HIZBOLLAH WINS" even though the Shiite party is likely to hold no more seats in parliament than the dozen or so that it occupies today. It will, in fact, be the gains of the Free Patriotic Movement – and the affiliated parties of its Change and Reform Bloc – that will push the opposition into the majority, giving Aoun and his allies control of the largest block of seats in parliament.

Analysts and commentators have produced millions of words in an attempt to understand Hezbollah and its intentions, but Aoun and his movement have been overlooked. The FPM touts its ambitious and sweeping reform agenda, but the party – which sent representatives to parliament for the first time in 2005 – has only a brief track record in government and a leader renowned for his mercurial behaviour. Predicting the country's course after the election is impossible, but it is clear that Michel Aoun and the Free Patriotic Movement are poised to play a major role – one that will test the party's sincerity and determination to reform what it regards as a weak and ineffectual state.

→ Aoun, continued on 4



review #saloon

House of cards

Inside Etisalat's treasure vault

Somewhere in Ajman, amid a sea of nondescript low-rise villas, sits the Ebtikar Card Systems factory, a drab building surrounded by a three-metre high concrete perimeter fence topped with barbed wire and security cameras.

"This is basically the bank of Etisalat," a staffer said as we buzzed through the first layer of security. "It's more like our Fort Knox," another chimed in.

The factory, one of Ajman's largest employers, makes every Etisalat recharge card sold in the Emirates. And it makes a lot of them: 420 million this year, the company hopes.

Because a recharge card is worth exactly what its face value says – and because mobile talk time is always in demand – printing them is a lot like printing money. Hence the fencing, and the cameras and the biometric security systems on the doors.

The cards are made by machines with Teutonic-sounding names like Mühlbaer and Atlantic Zeiser. Every hour, more than 20,000 cards are stamped out, then wrapped in clear plastic by the WrapMaster 100, which does what its name implies, and does it well. Then they are boxed and sent to the vault.

The vault, which sits at the heart of the building, is guarded by a blast-proof steel door. Once you get past that, there's a gate of steel bars. To open that gate, the factory manager needs to scan his fingerprint and turn a key. Simultaneously.

Inside the vault are hundreds of millions of dirhams of future Etisalat revenue. A single box of Dh100 cards is worth Dh120,000, and thousands of the shoebox-sized cartons are stacked in piles that reach for the ceiling.

It is worth noting, before anybody starts planning Ajman's Robbery of the Century, that every box of cards is traceable and Etisalat can easily deactivate the recharge numbers associated with a stolen box. The real risk, says Ebtikar chief executive David Huguet, is persistent low-level theft: people steadily stealing in quantities that are small enough to remain under the radar. "This is the only leakage that is possible," he says. "And all our security is built to target that."

Scammers used to buy recharge cards, then instead of scratching away the silver film, put the card under an ultraviolet light that let them read the number under-



Every hour, more than 20,000 Etisalat recharge cards are printed out then wrapped in clear plastic by (what else?) the WrapMaster 100. Randi Sokoloff / The National

neath. Then they would return the seemingly-pristine card to the store and ask for a refund. But Ebtikar is on to that game, and now prints the silver scratch layer in a "sandwich" structure, with a film of pure blackness in the middle, blocking UV light. "In many ways, these cards are far more secure than paper money," Huguet says.

Indeed, as the mobile phone increasingly becomes a truly universal possession (more than half of the world's population already owns one) recharge credit is emerging as an alternative currency, particularly in developing countries where the banking system has little interest in serving most of the population.

Nokia's in-house anthropologist, Jan Chipchase, often mentions

Uganda's "Sente" system, under which city dwellers use mobile networks to send money home to their families in the countryside. The sender buys a recharge card, but instead of loading it to his phone, he calls the mobile phone kiosk in his village, then reads out the recharge code. The kiosk owner resells the credit and gives the money in cash to the recipient.

The Sente system emerged spontaneously, but mobile networks are slowly launching official versions; in some countries, you can send money to a friend via text message; the friend uses a code to withdraw the cash from an ATM. This month, Vodafone (which bills more than 300 million customers) announced that it will soon open its global billing system to outside users. That

means a website in Canada will be able to bill a customer in India through their Vodafone account. In industry circles, mobile banking is tipped to be the Next Big Thing.

This all leaves the humble, low-tech scratch card looking distinctly old-fashioned. The card itself, worth just a few fils, is really just a vessel for a 12-digit code. And increasingly, even luddites who only use their phone for talking buy their credit from electronic terminals that print recharge codes on paper receipts – a process much cheaper than printing them on German equipment in Ajman, running them through the WrapMaster, locking them in a high-security vault and trucking them to stores across the country.

Huguet, a veteran of the recharge

card industry, knows that the electronic terminals are eating away at Ebtikar's product. But like an old-school newspaperman or record industry exec, he's convinced that an innate desire for the physical will keep him in business.

"Four years ago, all the operators were predicting that the scratch cards would disappear, and they invested a lot in the new solutions," he said. "But in the last year and a half, physical cards are going up again in market share. Why?"

He answers his own question quickly, in immaculate, French-accented English. "When someone is paying 10, 50, 100 dirhams, they want to have something in their hand."

★ Tom Gara



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The princess died

In the latest UAE-based novel, Anastasia Romanov avoids assassination by dashing off to Dubai

In March of 1917, Tsar Nicholas Romanov II of Russia gave up his throne, handing over power to a provisional government meant to facilitate Russia's transition to democracy. That didn't go so well; in October the Bolsheviks took power by force, and the country descended into civil war. The Bolsheviks placed the tsar and his family under house arrest in Yekaterinburg, a city in central Russia. On July 17, 1918, as loyalist fighters still faithful to the former tsar drew close to the city, the Bolsheviks took the Romanovs into a sub-basement, executed them and hid their corpses.

Almost immediately, people began claiming that not every Romanov died that night. Specifically, they claimed that the tsar's youngest daughter, Anastasia, had escaped: with help from a compassionate guard, with help from the doctor, with help from a priest, with help from the German government, with some good luck. Several would-be Anastasias came forth seeking public recognition of their royal blood. The theories were kept alive in large part because the Romanov burial site was not discovered until 1981 – and kept secret until the USSR fell in 1991. When it was, it was two bodies short.

Over the years, this scenario and its possible implications have inspired a veritable pantheon of Anastasia entertainment: plays, films, books, television serials, at least one video game – and now *The Pearl of Dubai*, a novel available exclusively as an e-book download (\$15 Australian) from the website of its author, Grant Foster. The book represents the intersection of two small but distinct genres: speculative Anastasia narratives and stories that conceive of Dubai as a sandy setting for the dramatic convergence of world-historical forces (see *Six Sacred Stones*, *The Godstone*, *Desert England*).

The Pearl of Dubai opens before Nicholas has abdicated; the Romanovs are going about their royal business. Palace romances abound. Whispers of discontent trickle in through the high walls. Rasputin mutters lots of menacing things.

For Marie Romanov's birthday, Nicholas invites Peter Fabergé (he of egg fame) to the Winter Palace to discuss jewellery designs. Anastasia wants pearls, but Fabergé informs her that she will have to wait four months.

"This is not something I can rush your Grand Duchesse. It takes time for the right pearls to become available, they must then be shipped to Petrograd... They come from Arabia... A small fishing village called Dubai."

Cue elaborate plot by a spoiled princess to sneak out of the palace and onto a ship bound for the Gulf. In this, Anastasia is aided most prominently by Regina, a common girl who resembles her a bit.

In the small but bustling fishing village that is 1916 Dubai, after a brief audience with Sheikh Maktoum, Anastasia heads into the desert to visit the Al Maha Oasis and Hajar Mountains. Two hours out of Dubai, however, her expedition party is hit by a sandstorm; Anastasia is thrown from her camel, blown far from the party and buried under the sand. Those who survive assume she is dead. But she is soon discovered by Rashed, a young Bedouin travelling Dubai to sell produce and crafts in the souq.

The book represents the intersection of two genres: speculative Anastasia narratives and stories that conceive of Dubai as a sandy setting for the dramatic convergence of world-historical forces

Because she is recovering in Rashed's family home in the foothills of the Hajar, Anastasia misses her family's execution, and the rest is counter-history. It would be cruel to potential e-readers to spell out exactly what happens next, but, as the tagline on Foster's website ("Today in Dubai — has DNA testing begun?") indicates, the Russian princess comes to enjoy her expat lifestyle quite a bit.

In August 2007, a Russian archaeologist discovered two partial skeletons near Yekaterinburg. For over a year, the remains were independently tested by several laboratories around the world; just this March, it was announced that every Romanov child, including Anastasia, died in 1918.

This doesn't worry Foster, an Australian classical composer and lifelong Dubai-phile. "The DNA tests prove some things but not everything. The novel is a fantasy, an opinion, but all the historical research was very carefully done. I just felt very strongly that something like this could possibly have happened. And I think still think it is at least possible that Anastasia is buried somewhere in the forest near Yekaterinburg."

Foster has already written several pieces of music based on *The Pearl of Dubai*, including a large orchestral work called *Anastasia and Rashed*. He is hoping to put on a show in Dubai, with the Russian National Orchestra performing his works. "Because of the troubles, we're waiting for sponsorship. But if it happens it will be spectacular; we'll have snow in the desert, a typical Dubai show."

Until then, Foster is putting the finishing touches on his second novel, a work of science-fiction. "It's about a group of children who go into a forest. They're told never to go there, and when they do they come across all sorts of aliens. They go to different planets."

"They also come across this woman and become puzzled by who she is. As the novel progresses it becomes increasingly worked out. You would know of her, but I can't tell you. You would know her name, let's put it that way."

★ Peter C Baker



Farmers and villagers clash with West Bengal police after the forced confiscation of land intended to house a Tata Motors plant in 2007. Corbis

Visible hands

Pankaj Mishra on the West's fantasies of a free-market 'New India'

Last month India held its 15th general elections. Those who recall some of the previous 14 could only marvel at the great interest the recent round of voting aroused in the western media. Less than a decade ago India was typically depicted in the international press as a poor, backward and often violent nation. Its experiments with democracy may have been unprecedented for a large poor country – but in the West they usually appeared solely in the guise of photographs of peasant women in colorful saris lining up to vote (this ageless staple popped up again in recent weeks). India's image received a dramatic makeover only in the early years of this century, when the country's protectionist economy, which was first liberalised in 1991, opened up further to foreign trade and investment.

With its "turbocharged" economy and its glossy new consumer culture, India suddenly became the poster-child for globalisation among western politicians, businessmen and journalists. It seemed not to matter that India remains one of the poorest countries in the world, where more than half of children under the age of five are malnourished, and where failed crops and debt have driven more than 100,000 farmers to suicide in the past decade. In 2006, *Foreign Affairs*, the house journal of America's foreign policy mandarins, crowned a series of ecstatic "India Inc" cover stories in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The Economist* by declaring India "a roaring capitalist success-story".

This new idea of India owed much to the post-Cold War ideological climate in the West. If the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions renewed a belief in the "magic of the marketplace", the collapse of Communist regimes provoked a millenarian conviction among politicians and journalists alike that the world had little choice but to converge on a single model of government (liberal democracy) and single economic system (free-market capitalism).

It became a journalistic reflex to credit economic growth and poverty-reduction in India (and China) to their market reforms, as though the two countries had done little in preceding decades except lurch from one socialist delusion to another. In fact, India's industrial output and GDP took off in the 1980s, well before a foreign exchange crisis forced the government to invite outside investment and deregulate private industry in 1991; it was also in the 1980s that India's poverty rate began its accelerated decline – at more or less the same rate as today.

The liberalisation of the Indian economy, apart from boosting corporate profits, also provided existential and ideological self-affirmation for many western elites. Certainly, among the Asian giants converging on the western model of modernity, India was more reassuring than China, whose communist rulers adopted capitalism while keeping a fastidious distance from liberal democracy.

India's tiny English-speaking elite, the beneficiaries of the country's new wealth and international prominence, amplified this foreign enthusiasm, helping to create an echo chamber where a small minority seems increasingly to hear its own voice. India's leading business paper, *The Economic Times*, introduced a regular feature devoted to chronicling what it called "The Global Indian Take-over". Few people remarked on the presumptuousness of the ruling party, the Hindu nationalist BJP, when it campaigned in the 2004 elections with the slogan "India Shining". Indeed, almost all of the English-language press in India predicted a BJP victory.

The Congress party, then in the opposition, seemed a bit forlorn, campaigning, as *The Economist* put it, "as the party of India's secular traditions, as well as of the poor, especially those in the countryside, for whom the fast-growing economy is just a distant rumour". As it turned out, the party found itself in power, and Manmohan Singh, an Oxford-educated economist, became prime minister. The majority of Indians voted against incumbent politicians, unseating, among others, strongly pro-business state governments in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka (whose capital, Bangalore, had become synonymous with the high-tech "New India" championed by the likes of Thomas Friedman).

Arguing that "catastrophe for the ruling party need not spell the end of reform", *The Economist* declared after the election in 2004 that "the strongest reason to hope that India is indeed on the path to Chinahood is the bipartisan consensus on the virtues of privatisation, deregulation and opening to the outside world". But if this consensus existed, the Congress was forced to conceal it from the vast majority of Indians.

In the next five years business periodicals like *The Economist* and *Financial Times* often complained that economic "reforms" had stalled, blaming the Congress's left-wing coalition partners. But then Manmohan Singh was unlikely to lose sight of why the Congress won the last election. When he assumed

office in 2004, agriculture, which still sustains 60 per cent of India's 1.2 billion-strong population, was stagnating. The "boom" sector of the economy – information technology and business-processing offices (which employ only about 1.5 million of the 400 million-person workforce) – was not only failing to create enough jobs for the swelling ranks of the young unemployed in India; it had also deepened pre-existing imbalances between rural and urban areas.

In 2004, the backlash from Indians who felt themselves excluded from the benefits of globalisation was just building up. Singh's plan to set up Chinese-style Special Economic Zones for foreign companies quickly ran into violent opposition from farmers facing eviction from their lands. Plans to relax India's labour laws – in other words, to import the hire-and-fire practices of American companies – provoked strong protests from trade unions. Since the last elections, the militant communist insurgencies led by landless and tribal people have broadened their base in central India, prompting Singh to describe them as the biggest internal security threat in the history of the state.

Singh's government was obliged to play by the "free trade" rules mandated by the World Trade Organisation. But it could not commit political suicide by lowering import tariffs on foreign agriculture products. Unable to persuade the United States to cut its subsidies to American farmers, the Indian commerce minister spent much of his time at the WTO's Doha Round of talks in July 2006 watching the football World Cup. Lamenting that the Indian government had "pandered shamelessly to its protectionist farmers", the *Financial Times* wrote that "leading players" such as India have become "servants rather than managers of their domestic constituencies". But this was to assume that a bit of managerial sweet-talking would persuade more than a billion highly unequal and politicised Indians.

Perhaps this is why India receives one-tenth the foreign investment lavished on China, where lack of democratic accountability has allowed the Communist regime to give generous subsidies and tax breaks to exporters and outside investors – and to swiftly suppress peasant protests and seize land as it likes.

Manmohan Singh could not go as far as his Chinese colleagues in creating a "business-friendly" climate. Ignoring western demands for further liberalisation of domestic industry, trade and banking, Singh kept many regulations in place. (All of India's big banks remain state-owned, and were consequently insulated from the financial meltdown in the west.) Continuously under pressure from his left-wing allies, Singh himself seemed reluctant to embrace the neo-liberal vision of consumer societies full of self-seeking individuals. In a little-reported but extraordinarily revealing interview with *The Economic Times* in

2006, Singh made it clear that only a small minority in India can and will enjoy "western standards of living and high consumption". Singh, who was responding to another wave of farmer suicides, exhorted his countrymen to abandon "wasteful" western consumerism and learn from the frugal ways of Gandhi, which he claimed were a "necessity" in India.

This year Congress under the astute Sonia Gandhi again built its election campaign around the travails of the "aam aadmi" – the ordinary Indian – in the age of globalisation. Arguing for "inclusive growth", its manifesto proposed a rejection of the BJP's "policy of blind privatisation". In the months leading up to the election, the Congress-led government showered the poorest Indians with much largesse: a generous loan waiver, and most importantly, the expansion of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, a vast national jobs programme intended to lift millions out of poverty. Paradoxically, the left parties, which are in power in the state of West Bengal, bore the brunt of populist anger over their appropriation of farmland on behalf of India's leading industrial groups.

Undaunted by previous let-downs, *The Economist* hailed the Congress victory, yet again hoping for "liberal reforms" – this time in the "country's statist financial sector", despite that fact that state ownership is what protected India from the disastrous mistakes of western bankers. *The Wall Street Journal*, which admitted that "the world economic crisis has reaffirmed the views of many politicians and technocrats that the go-slow approach has helped insulate the Indian economy from the vicissitudes of global capitalism", nevertheless called on India to continue "reforming its archaic labor laws and perhaps opening it further to global capital flows".

It is no easy job to interpret the results of the Indian elections, which reflect many different tendencies and dynamic identities of caste and region in a vast and complex country. But it does help to remember that the neo-liberal free market, for all the private wealth it creates, exacts social costs so high that, as the British philosopher John Gray writes, they "cannot for long be legitimated in any democracy". It is again clear in the West that democratically elected governments, whether of the left or right, have to urgently respond to the crises created by unregulated capitalism's cycles of boom and bust – indeed, their very survival depends on their ability to restore checks and balances. This is also what India's last two elections have proved: a lesson the Congress and economic "reformers" in the West would do well to remember until the next time peasant Indian women in colorful saris congregate before voting booths.

Pankaj Mishra's most recent book is *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond*.

the tangled web

Rare bumblebee coming back to UK

A bumblebee which is extinct in the UK is to be reintroduced from New Zealand under plans being announced.

The short-haired bumblebee was exported from the UK to New Zealand on the first refrigerated lamb boats in the late 19th Century to pollinate clover crops.

It was last seen in the UK in 1988, but populations on the other side of the world have survived.

Now Natural England and several other conservation groups have launched a scheme to bring the species home.

Poul Christensen, Natural England's acting chairman, said; "Bumblebees are suffering unprecedented international declines and drastic action is required to aid their recovery.

"Bumblebees play a key role in maintaining food supplies – we rely on their ability to pollinate crops and we have to do all we can to provide suitable habitat and to sustain the diversity of bee species.

"This international rescue mission has two aims – to restore habitat in England, thereby giving existing bees a boost; and to bring the short-haired bumblebee home where it can be protected."

As many as 100 of the bees will initially be collected in New Zealand and a captive breeding plan established, with the aim of eventually releasing them at Dungeness, Kent, where they were last seen.

They will be flown back on planes in cool boxes, and will not be disturbed, according to Natural England, as they will be in hibernation during transit.



BBC
news.bbc.co.uk

British estate produces Kiwi favourite

Tregothnan Estate in Britain has made history by being the first company to produce Manuka Honey outside of New Zealand.

Manuka was imported to Tregothnan in the 1880s as an ornamental plant.

And three years ago, the managers of the Cornwall estate decided to see if they too could produce Manuka Honey.

Manuka Health New Zealand says the northern hemisphere version doesn't contain enough of the active ingredient to class itself as authentic Manuka Honey, but Tregothnan says with thousand of Manuka plants on the estate, growing conditions in Cornwall are no different than the Coromandel.

"With better weather which we hope to have in the next six weeks then there is every reason to expect a good activity level and we'd be very happy to have that tested," says Tregothnan Garden director, Jonathan Jones.

But it's not just other honey producers that are a buzz about this newcomer. Maori are also upset.

They say the use of Manuka is a theft of a *taonga* (literally "treasured thing").

However Mr Jones says while it is New Zealand's honey, it is their bees.

"They want these Manuka bushes back, the fact is they've been here for 120 years so I think that's fair," Mr Jones says. "But we must have back our European honey bee. That's fair isn't it?"

Tregothnan's honey retails for £55, or roughly \$140NZ. And while that may seem like liquid gold, the makers insist they aren't making money.

"We've been criticised for being too expensive, but you know the reality is Tregothnan won't make money on Manuka Honey for many years because the cost of having bee keepers and expanding the plantation," Mr Jones says.

Part of the cost associated with making the honey is the hives. Looking like a castle and costing just about as much at \$12,000 each, they're specially designed to create an air-conditioned atmosphere for the bees.

Living conditions like these make the New Zealand honey industry look like a poor cousin, but Tregothnan isn't out to compete.

Last year the estate made only around a hundred pots of Manuka Honey, which is less than 3kg of the stuff.



3news
3news.co.nz

Bee thieves swarm on valuable hives

Bee keepers are being warned to protect their hives against thieves who are risking stings and serious injury from swarms to steal large quantities of honey bees.

The new crime wave is being fuelled by the decimation of the bee population, thought to be due to disease and recent wet summers.

Bill Seddon, managing director of the Gardien security website, which specialises in garden theft, warned apiarists: "We are receiving reports almost daily now of attacks on beekeepers' properties across the country.

"Recent incidents have been spread as far as Staffordshire and Whitby on the East coast. These criminals who are stealing multiple hives clearly have knowledge of how to deal with bees and a lucrative black market trade is emerging.

"It's a double whammy for bee keepers who are losing not only their bees but a crop of honey as well, and with it their livelihood."

The pollination of crops by bees is worth up to £200m a year to British farmers and the indirect contribution to the food industry is estimated at £1 billion.

The shortage of bees could create an eco-imbalance if numbers are further affected and this concern recently resulted in the government making a significant investment in the beekeeping industry and research.

Seddon said: "Beekeepers need to review their site security as a matter of urgency. There is much to be done to minimise the risk and with the value of many hive contents running into thousands of pounds it makes good commercial sense."

He recommended good perimeter protection and lighting, plus CCTV "for larger sites where power is available.

"Hive lids should be secured with good quality padlocks and hasps or secure braces to the floor, DNA property marking should be considered and preventive signage to let the thief know the owner is security aware. Insurance cover should also be examined."

Alan Hyder
Info4Security
info4security.com





Alain Aoun, the nephew of Michel Aoun and a candidate for Parliament, at his campaign office. Bryan Denton for the National



Michel Aoun during his tenure as commander of the Lebanese Army in 1989. Joseph Barrak / AFP

The Lebanese have embraced the trappings of western-style campaigning with such vigour and fluency that it is easy to forget that this is largely uncharted territory

→ Aoun, continued from 1

At noon on a weekday in May, Alain Aoun's campaign offices are bustling. Volunteers talk on cell phones as they weave briskly between rooms, handing out press materials and schedules. Along one wall is a swath of campaign posters displaying the faces of the Change and Reform candidates for the mixed-constituency district of Baabda, a narrow strip extending from the coast just south of Beirut into the surrounding hills, where the 37-year-old Aoun, a nephew of the general, is running for a parliamentary seat.

A telecommunications engineer by training, the candidate – who bears a strong resemblance to his uncle but projects a rather more circumspect and bookish air – sits at a large table in a makeshift conference room with exposed rafters and loose wiring. Covering a wall behind him is an enormous map of Baabda with colour-coded annotations scribbled alongside the names of towns and villages, corresponding to some kind of campaign strategy. He squints at his own handwriting in a leather-bound agenda, scanning his appointment schedule for the rest of the week: meetings at municipalities and the homes of local families, after-church coffee hours, press conferences, campaign rallies in the larger towns of the district, and more. “The strategy is basically to see as many people as possible,” says Alain. “We’re constantly moving.”

Four years ago, March 14 won this district with the help of an electoral law that joined it with a neighbouring region under the political sway of the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. The law, in an ironic twist, had been drafted for the 2000 elections by Ghazi Kanaan, Syria's chief intelligence officer in Lebanon, with the primary aim of ensuring the rise of yet another puppet government subservient to Damascus. Still in place in 2005, it helped return some of the very same players to power, albeit on the back of a strongly anti-Syrian platform, due to the public outcry against the murder of Rafik Hariri.

One of the principal features of the “Ghazi Kanaan Law”, as it has disparagingly been dubbed by the Aounists, was the drawing of districts in such a way that would marginalise the effect of the Christian vote, with the intention of curtailing the largely Christian resistance to the Syrian occupation. Since then, the passage of a new electoral law with smaller, more confessionally homogeneous districts has changed the dynamics of the competition in places like Baabda, leading the FPM to believe that it can sweep the district's six seats.

“The numbers look very good,”

says Alain, speaking in measured yet confident tones. “We chose our candidates on the basis of extensive polling, so we feel that the results will be positive.” When I suggest that the outcome of Baabda's election could be decisive in determining the national majority – 65 seats out of a 128-seat parliament – Alain demurs: “Our numbers put us in a very good position across the country, not just in Baabda. I think the FPM and our allies in Change and Reform will win around thirty-five to forty seats, if not more. In that case, we'll be the biggest bloc in parliament.”

Both the majority and the opposition are looking to these elections as an opportunity to secure a clear mandate after the political morass of the past four years, characterised by war, instability, and paralysis at the highest levels of government. The FPM's campaign has taken “change” as its mantra, depicting March 14 and its vaunted “Cedar Revolution” of 2005 as so much window dressing on the same old class of politicians who previously collaborated with (and profited from) the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. Michel Aoun and his allies blame this political establishment for the state's massive public debt, the rampant corruption and inefficiency, and the lack of a clear plan to resolve Lebanon's many systemic problems, while presenting themselves – the perennial outsiders of Lebanese politics – as the only party truly committed to challenging the status quo. “Our goal is to overhaul the entire system,” says Alain Aoun. “Because we've never been in power, we don't have this built-in sense of which reforms are politically correct and which are supposedly off limits. We're going to move forward with our programme, no matter what.” He pauses, fixes me with a serious stare, and adds: “Like a bulldozer.”

The FPM programme gestures less towards an incremental approach for reforming the existing power structure than towards a replacement of the foundations upon which the state apparatus rests – hence the grand title, “The Third Republic”. Lebanon's Second Republic was established after the end of the civil war, and its founding document – the Ta'if Accord – maintained the sectarian nature of the political system while simultaneously calling for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism through the creation of a senate and the adoption of a non-confessional electoral law. None of these reforms have ever been pursued, and the system of patronage politics and the concomitant corruption and mismanagement that it facilitated in virtually every government sector – from the public school system to the electricity authority to the judicial branch – have persisted

until the present day. This despite the fact that addressing the problem of political sectarianism is a sentiment widespread among Lebanese of every confession and ideological persuasion. “Something drastic has to be done,” says Alain Aoun, “and we are the people who will do it.”

While the FPM is not the only party to have released an electoral platform (just as it is not the only party calling for the separation of religion from politics), it has led the way in the effort to make this an election of issues, rather than a one-dimensional referendum on Lebanon's sovereignty and its independence from Syria, as was the case in 2005. This effort has succeeded in certain respects, as attested by the proliferation of other party platforms, elaborated with varying degrees of detail and polish. Between 1990 and 2005, when elections were formalities rigged by Syria and boycotted or ignored by most of the electorate, political platforms were largely nonexistent. But the end of the Syrian occupation in April 2005

opened a void in Lebanese politics, forcing political parties into a competition to advance their own distinct visions for the future of their state. Practically overnight, it seems, elections suddenly matter, and the Lebanese have embraced the trappings of Western-style campaigning – relentless polling, sophisticated messaging and televised rallies – with such vigour and fluency that it is easy to forget that this is largely uncharted territory.

While the traditional bases of Lebanon's Sunni and Shiite parties remain secure, the fight for the Christian swing vote has been particularly intense, creative, and expensive. Roadways within the Christian areas of the country have been positively blanketed with billboards, becoming the stage upon which a provocative and witty discourse of messaging has played out. The FPM campaign has relentlessly assailed the stewardship of the present government, pushing a one-note message of change, while March 14's cam-

paigned advertisements have sought to depict an opposition victory as utterly catastrophic for Lebanon, with billboards showing destroyed buildings, tattered flags and ominous warnings of the ruin that will be brought down upon the heads of the Lebanese should Hizbollah and the FPM prevail.

Despite the attempts of both coalitions to project a nationalist and multiconfessional image, there is no mistaking the efforts to exploit old sources of sectarian, tribal and clan loyalties in order to court votes, especially among Christians. At the end of the day, the 2009 elections will, in a way, test the persistence of these loyalties, as partnerships are struck between the unlikeliest of allies and unfamiliar ideologies are tried on for size.

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No alliance of the post-Syrian era has been more surprising than the pact between the reform-minded Christian secularists of the FPM and the conservative Shiite Islamists of Hizbollah. On February 6, 2006, the two parties held a joint press conference in which they announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding. The document, developed over a period of several months by senior officials from both sides, outlined a common vision on 10 issues, including electoral reform, Lebanese-Palestinian relations and the matter of Hezbollah's weapons. The press conference – held for symbolic reasons at a church near the old wartime border between East and West Beirut – was reportedly the first time that Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah had ever met in person.

The announcement stunned the country. Many young FPM partisans, as well as members of leftist parties and opponents of political sectarianism, considered it a courageous step by two parties eager to put a long history of antagonism behind them. For others – including many FPM supporters who were already uneasy with their party's opposition to the burgeoning March 14 movement – the memorandum with Hizbollah was a step too far. Joining forces with a party long regarded as a proxy of Syria and Iran and dismissively labelled a “terrorist organisation” by Aoun as recently as 2003, proved too much for some to stomach. In the words of one disillusioned supporter – a relative of mine – the decision was “incomprehensible.” “When Aoun returned in 2005, we were ecstatic,” he said. “We gave him all of our support. Now look what he's gone and done.”

It was indeed an astonishing turn for a movement established as the vanguard of Christian resistance against the Syrian domination of

Lebanon, and for Michel Aoun himself – a primary symbol and champion of this resistance – who had carried his war against Syria from the streets of Beirut to the halls of the US Congress. Born to working class parents nine years after the establishment of the Lebanese Republic, Aoun joined the Lebanese army in the mid-1950s and rose up through the ranks to become its youngest commander-in-chief at the age of 49. During the waning years of the civil war, Aoun was appointed prime minister of a military government by the outgoing president, Amin Gemayel, a move that was challenged by the Syrian-backed prime minister, Salim al Hoss. As the conflict deepened, Aoun declared a “war of liberation” against the Syrian army, and the two sides waged destructive artillery battles in Beirut for several months.

In October 1990, Aoun's fight against the Syrian military occupation ended in defeat and exile. Under siege in the presidential palace on the morning of October 13, he reportedly made his decision to surrender after hearing Syrian warplanes over Beirut, a clear sign that the assault on his forces had received the approval of the United States – whose ally, Israel, controlled Lebanese airspace. Through the mediation of the French embassy, he was eventually allowed to leave the country, thereby removing one of the last effective obstacles to the coming Pax Syriaana.

For 15 years, Aoun continued to direct the struggle against Syria from Paris. In Lebanon, the resistance was diffuse. “There was nothing called the Free Patriotic Movement at that time,” according to Ziad Abs, a member of the FPM's political bureau, who says he was arrested at least 30 times by the Lebanese security services. “We were a bunch of student groups, social clubs and professional associations that weren't aware of each other at all. When we did meet members from other groups, it was usually in jail.” Young, middle-class, mostly Christian professionals who had congregated in university organisations in the shadow of the Lebanese political establishment became a major source of support for the burgeoning Aounist movement. In the absence of a political organisation, resistance to the Syrian occupation became a fervent moral cause. The atmosphere of intimidation during the 1990s forced the movement's leadership to meet abroad, where, in 1996, the Free Patriotic Movement was officially established under the presidency of Aoun. Meanwhile, the Syrian-Saudi condominium in Lebanon had ushered in a period of stability, facilitating



An FPM billboard in Beirut reads “49 billion dollars have disappeared”, a reference to the state's massive public debt. Bilal Hussein / AP Photo

Year in which Lebanon's last official census was conducted



An FPM rally in Beirut on May 28: "Listening to the Aounists it remains hard to determine whether their fervent wish is for a new Christian strongman in the form of Michel Aoun or for the secularist agenda that he espouses." Ramzi Haidar / AFP

reconstruction efforts and enabling the rise of a powerful prime minister in Rafik Hariri. Lebanon's apparent economic revival led many to conclude that Syrian tutelage was an acceptable price to pay for stability; as such, the FPM – with its message of implacable opposition to Syria – had little tangible presence in Lebanese politics and no international profile, even as the movement became increasingly organised and attracted growing support.

This state of affairs changed entirely in 2003 when America sought to enlist Syria's participation in its Iraq war effort. Syria's refusal, coupled with the rise of the neoconservatives in Washington, opened up a space for Aoun to plead his case for Lebanese sovereignty before the Bush administration. Travelling to the US that year, Aoun hailed the Iraq war and urged the Americans not to stop in Baghdad, saying "There are despots throughout the region that may fall like dominoes... The American action may bring the Middle East into the 21st century." Aoun himself testified before Congress in favour of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, calling for an end to the Syrian presence in Lebanon – now termed an "occupation" by the US government.

Aoun's hopes were realised a year and a half later, when massive demonstrations following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in Beirut led to the resignation of the puppet government and the departure of the Syrian Army. Aoun returned to Lebanon in triumph on May 7, 2005, ten days after the last Syrian soldier stepped over the border. Within weeks, Lebanon's first free parliamentary elections in decades saw the victory of the March 14 coalition in a power-sharing agreement with the country's two Shiite parties, Hizbollah and Amal. The Change and Reform Bloc – which comprised Aoun's FPM and several (mostly Christian) allies – won 21 seats, greatly surpassing expectations. However, when talks broke down between Aoun and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora over the number of ministerial portfolios accorded to the FPM in the national unity government, Aoun decided to withdraw entirely and remain in parliamentary opposition. Less than a year later, the Memorandum of Understanding with Hizbollah was announced.

Explanations for why the FPM decided to formulate its memorandum with Hizbollah are manifold. A common reading is that the relationship between the two parties is based entirely on expediency: essentially, that Michel Aoun wanted to use an alliance with the pro-Syrian camp in order to impose himself as president of Lebanon after the expiration of

Emile Lahoud's term in 2007. There may be some truth to this theory, particularly in light of recent revelations that Aoun had come to an agreement with the Syrian regime in April 2005, stipulating that he could return to Lebanon as long as he did not join the March 14 chorus calling for the impeachment of the pro-Syrian Lahoud – with the presumption that Aoun expected to be ushered in as the obvious replacement. With the fast lane to the presidency blocked by Syria, the theory goes, Aoun had to find an alternate route to fulfil his presidential ambitions.

This account of political manoeuvring during the heady days of 2005, however, tends to ignore Aoun's longstanding distaste for the parties who rode the surge of anti-Syrian sentiment into power. The FPM view of the political figures who led March 14 – above all, the Hariri family and Walid Jumblatt – regarded them as little better than the Syrian occupiers themselves. To Aoun and his party, Rafiq Hariri was an unambiguous symbol of the corruption and cronyism of the Syrian era, and the primary beneficiary of the Ta'if Accord, which had redistributed power within both the legislative and executive branches of government at the expense of Lebanese Christians. Relegating his party to serve as just another standard-bearer for the Cedar Revolution led by Hariri's son Saad proved to be highly disagreeable to Aoun, who considered himself – by virtue of his status as the most popular Christian leader in Lebanon – entitled to lead such a movement.

Supporters of the alliance, on the other hand, suggest that it is a long-term strategy based on a perceptive reading of regional and domestic political trends. Ghassan Moukheiber, an MP in Aoun's Change and Reform Bloc, argues that "for the last few years, the General has gone through a realist phase. He looks at the political situation here from a different perspective than he used to." According to Moukheiber, Aoun has come to the realisation that the best way to solve Lebanon's problems "is to bring everyone to the table, without isolating anyone".

This strategy, which represents a dramatic shift in the FPM's political orientation, might be called compassionate containment. Recognising that any attempt to disarm Hizbollah by force would lead to civil war, the FPM has sought to situate the process of disarmament within a larger political framework while also coming to agreement on the nature and scope of the resistance's military objectives. While this is not the first attempt by the political establishment to influence Hizbollah's activities through negotiation – several rounds of national dialogue

● **"Because we've never been in power, we don't have this built-in sense of which reforms are politically correct and which are supposedly off limits. We're going to move forward with our programme, no matter what." He pauses, fixes me with a serious stare, and adds: "Like a bulldozer"**

talks since 2000 have all put the issue of the resistance on the table – what is unique about the FPM approach is the degree to which it seems to be based on a willingness to give Hizbollah an equal stake in articulating a vision for producing long-term stability in Lebanon.

"The Memorandum of Understanding was not thrown together haphazardly for electoral reasons," says Ziad Abs, who was one of the two FPM officials who helped draft the agreement. "We had many long discussions, sometimes very tough ones, with Hizbollah before we were all satisfied. Every single paragraph, every word, was given to both parties' leaderships, who then made revisions which had to be checked with the other side, and so on and so forth. The whole process took months."

Alain Aoun says that the experience of drafting the agreement brought the two parties closer together, and that the resulting bond has already translated into tangible returns. "What we're trying to do is build trust," says Alain. "If we disagree about something, they are not going to accuse us of being Zionist collaborators. Take Nahr al-Bared," he says, referring to the Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon where the Lebanese Army fought a bloody three-month war with an armed Islamist group called Fatah al-Islam. "Hizbollah was completely against the army going into the camps, and even called it a 'red line'. For the FPM, there was absolutely no question that the army had to intervene, and we told that to Hizbollah. They backed off, and the army went in."

Critics of the FPM argue that its agreement with Hizbollah is based on a naive reading of the Shiite party's intentions and its *raison d'être*. "If you came to Hizbollah and offered more political power for the Shiites in exchange for giving up their arms, they would shoot it down in a second," says Michael Young, the opinion editor of the *Daily Star*. "Hizbollah is a party that needs instability to survive. So, a project of exchanging arms for political stability is not in their interests." This line of argument is hardly unfamiliar to the Aounists, whose position on Hizbollah was, for years, very similar to Young's. Even today, one senses that the old instincts are never that far beneath the surface – particularly among the FPM's electoral base – but that the party is willing to tread water on the question of Hizbollah's weapons as long as it has the latitude, and the votes within parliament, to pursue its reform programme.

"Even if I agree that the weapons are a problem, how does that have anything to do with the fact that we need a new electoral law, or that we

need to fight corruption, or that we need to protect our environment?" asks Alain Aoun. "The March 14 forces have made Hizbollah's weapons their only issue while they neglect every other problem in the country, from the public debt to the electricity blackouts. We have a different approach."

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What lies ahead for Lebanon? If the past four years are any indication, the election result is unlikely to lead to a brisk and decisive changing of the guard. Due to the tortuous nature of consensual politics, the choice of a prime minister and the formation of the government are likely to take time and require extensive deliberation. The nationwide stupor brought on by election fever – with all its promises of change and renewal – is bound to be followed by a rude awakening when politics resume their usual course on June 8.

This should not distract from the underappreciated reality that Lebanon is in a process of significant change. Having emerged from the deep freeze of post-civil war reconstruction and the tutelage of the Syrian era, a national debate about various existential issues is beginning to take place. Questions about the viability of the consociational system, reform of the electoral law, and a credible defence strategy, among others, are beginning to be asked with increasing urgency, partly because – for the first time in decades – the Lebanese are in a position to answer them.

The end of the Syrian occupation unleashed a surprisingly vibrant and energetic debate among ordinary Lebanese, much of it carried out on blogs, online news and social networking sites, and internet chat forums. Most of the political parties now maintain online messageboards, none larger than The Orange Room, a garrulous and impassioned community of Aoun obsessives. Established in 2004, the site has a membership of 18,000 users, and has registered nearly 800,000 comments over 25,000 threads. On any given day, thousands of people log on to debate a wide range of issues, from the latest speech by Hassan Nasrallah (or "SHN", as he is known on the site) to the wiretapping scandal surrounding Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil, the current telecommunications minister. In the run-up to the present election, which has understandably dominated all discussion on the site, amateur political strategists and prognosticators have meticulously dissected every aspect of the upcoming vote, arguing the strengths and weaknesses of individual candidates and presenting elaborate analyses of macro-political trends. Even as

the FPM sits on the precipice of obtaining power, the unbounded arguments on its no-frills website retain the air of an aggrieved and strident underground opposition – the legacy of a movement that first took shape as a diffuse network of ideologically-committed university students and young professionals.

Just as discussions among fiery partisans on the American liberal political site Daily Kos are infinitely more expressive of the current state of Democratic Party politics in the United States than any standard election platform, the debates in The Orange Room provide an expansive window on the identity and evolution of the FPM, through the opinions, aspirations and grievances of its core supporters. Its pages abound with unabashed veneration of General Aoun (referred to affectionately as "GMA"), undying scorn for the leadership of March 14, and even fiercer criticism of the FPM's own electoral allies whenever they appear to deviate from the Aounists' principles. Following the recent disagreement between Aoun and the Amal leader Nabih Berri over whose candidates should contest the southern district of Jezzine, furious Orange Room denizens complained for days about the ingratitude of their allies, citing the sacrifices they believed the FPM had made for the broader opposition cause.

The Aounist forums bring home the point – evident in the party's electoral rhetoric but more conspicuous in the candid discussions between its partisans – that the FPM seems to occupy a hybrid position, somewhere between a traditional Lebanese confessional party orientated around a single charismatic leader, and a modern political movement committed to certain ideological principles. Listening to the Aounists talk amongst themselves it remains hard to determine whether their fervent wish is for a new Christian strongman in the form of Michel Aoun or for the secularist agenda that he espouses.

In its present role in the opposition, it has been easy for the FPM to criticise the majority without bearing responsibility for the decisions of government. But if the party prevails on June 7 and takes a decisive role in shaping the legislative agenda for the next four years, all eyes will be on the FPM to see if it wields the authority it has long sought to enact far-reaching reforms – or if the party and its allies, safe within the halls of the Second Republic, find its pillars too secure to topple.

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review

books

Were there that many vases?

The remarkable fact about the looting of the Iraq Museum, Hugh Eakin writes, is not how little it was anticipated – but how much it was forewarned

In February, 2003, about a month before the invasion of Iraq, a former American diplomat quietly flew to Baghdad to meet with Tariq Aziz, Saddam Hussein's deputy prime minister. A Middle East hand who served in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, William R Polk was on an improbable mission: he was hoping to persuade the Baathist regime to remove the unparalleled collections of Baghdad's Iraq Museum to Jordan for safekeeping. This was no mere whim. The heads of the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Oriental Institute of Chicago and the American Museum of Natural History in New York were to co-sponsor the project; the Jordanians told Polk they were prepared to give the green light, pending Baghdad's consent. The well-connected Polk had even secured private funding to cover the cost of packing and shipping the collection to Amman. With a US invasion now almost certain, however, the Iraqis had other things to worry about. The plan went nowhere.

In what can only be a cruel irony for Polk, more than a few of the Iraq Museum's masterworks did end up in Jordan within months of his visit to Baghdad. Early last year, I was taken to a cavernous warehouse in East Amman that was stuffed from floor to ceiling with over a thousand Mesopotamian antiquities. It was an impressive chunk of Iraq's ancient past, ranging from Old Babylonian tablets and Akkadian cylinder seals to Assyrian votive statues, Aramaic incantation bowls and Roman and Persian coins. Many of the pieces were still labelled with their Iraq Museum inventory numbers; an even larger number appeared to have been freshly looted from Iraqi soil. And since the warehouse only contained those objects that had been seized at the Jordanian border, the actual quantity of antiquities that had been smuggled into Jordan – and across Iraq's other porous borders – stretched the imagination.

As we now know, on April 10, 2003 – exactly one day after Coalition forces had symbolically established control of Baghdad by tearing down the statue of Saddam Hussein before a global television audience – the Iraq Museum was plundered. On that morning began an unchecked orgy of looting that, despite the presence of American troops nearby, lasted three days and resulted in the theft of some 15,000 objects, among them some of the most extraordinary remains of the early history of world civilisation. It was arguably the worst attack on a museum since the spoliation of European treasure houses by the Germans and Soviets in the Second World War. And despite a successful US-run amnesty programme that recovered a number of the most important artefacts in the summer of 2003, about half of the looted pieces – over 7,000 objects – have never been located.

Six years later, the Iraq Museum debacle stands as a key turning point in the opening phase of the Iraq war – a kind of loss of innocence, when even some of the invasion's staunchest supporters first began to realise how disastrously unprepared Coalition forces were for the occupation of Iraq. With this shock has come a standard two-part explanation – reiterated in voluminous press accounts

and numerous books – for why it happened. First, the Pentagon had made a blanket decision not to enforce martial law or do basic police work in Baghdad in the days immediately following the fall of Saddam Hussein. But more important, no one in the Bush administration seemed to be aware of the museum's importance: senior US commanders didn't even know its location. Such was the level of ignorance about Iraq's ancient heritage that Donald Rumsfeld, when asked about the looting, could say: "the images you are seeing on television... it's the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase, and you see it 20 times, and you think, 'My goodness, were there that many vases? Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?'"

Yet as Polk's ill-fated diplomacy makes clear, in the run-up to the invasion, many people – not only archaeologists and museum directors but also former US officials – had been deeply concerned about the threat to the Iraq Museum. Indeed, as Lawrence Rothfield shows in his new book, *The Rape of Mesopotamia*, what is remarkable about the looting was not how little it was anticipated, but rather how extraordinary and numerous were the attempts in late 2002 and early 2003 to warn American and British war planners. In recounting the little-known efforts of Polk and others to prevent the pillage, Rothfield, who is the director of a cultural policy institute at the University of Chicago, puts into play some critical – and until now largely ignored – questions about the role of cultural expertise in 21st century warfare.

What ethical responsibility do cultural institutions, scholars and archaeologists bear when governments adopt policies or take actions that may pose grave risks to world heritage – risks that they alone may be able to identify? What if the action in question is a controversial war of choice? And in view of such recent calamities as the destruction of the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, is a categorical position against in-

volvement in military intervention a legitimate one?

These questions have no easy answers, and they are not directly addressed in Rothfield's book. But his revelatory backstory of the Iraq Museum crisis suggests that what he calls the "peacetime" orientation of the American and British cultural establishment may be hopelessly ill-suited to countering the most pernicious threats to sites and monuments today.

It is a tale that begins not in Baghdad, but in the nether-reaches of Washington's foreign policy bureaucracy. As early as November 2002, MacGuire Gibson, an archaeologist at the University of Chicago with intimate knowledge of Iraq, wrote to Ryan Crocker – who would later become ambassador to Iraq, but was then an organiser of the State Department's "Future of Iraq" planning group – with an urgent message about the vulnerability of the country's ancient heritage. Gibson placed special emphasis on the Iraq Museum. "Even if the museum survives bombing, in the chaos of war it will probably suffer major looting," Crocker was told.

Around the same moment, Rothfield recounts, a group of American museum officials and art world leaders led by Arthur Houghton, a seasoned former diplomat and museum curator, wrote a series of letters to senior Bush administration officials, urging them "to move quickly to establish security" for Iraqi "monuments, sites, and museums" in any future US military action in Iraq; the letters also called for the formation of a special task force to plan how this might be done. On November 29, 2002, the group followed up with an Op-Ed in the *Washington Post* warning of the grave threat posed to Iraq's ancient heritage and designed, Rothfield suggests, "to ratchet up the pressure" on the US officials who had received the letters.

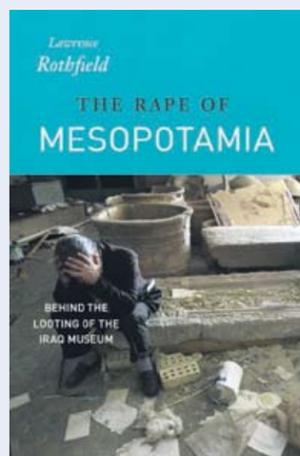
In fact, it was already well-known that Iraqi museums, along with other government institutions, had been plundered during the Shia and Kurdish uprisings in 1991 – attacks that should have immediately come under scrutiny in any serious effort to plan for a post-Saddam Iraq. But in case they did not, in January 2003, the Archaeological Institute of America – a leading professional body for archaeologists – sent a letter to the Pentagon, observing that:

"Following the 1991 Gulf War, archaeological sites and museums in Iraq were looted on a large scale, with stolen antiquities appearing on the art markets in Western Europe and the United States. We therefore call upon the appropriate governments to take reasonable actions to prevent such looting in the aftermath of war."

In late January, these various appeals were supplemented by direct briefings with US Defense and State Department officials: on January 24, the deputy assistant secretary of defence for stability operations invited Arthur Houghton's group, together with Gibson, the archaeologist, to the Pentagon to talk about Iraq's cultural heritage. According to Rothfield, the participants "came away from the meeting with the impression that the Pentagon had agreed to take steps to protect the museum and sites from looting by Iraqis". That afternoon, most of the same group met with Ryan Crocker at the State Department.



The three-day-long plunder of Baghdad's Iraq Museum resulted in the theft of some 15,000 objects. Patrick Baz / AFP



The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum

Lawrence Rothfield
University of Chicago Press
Dh105

Nor did the matter end there. The Defense Intelligence Agency, the organisation within the Pentagon that had played such an important role in making the case for invading Iraq, enlisted Gibson to identify important cultural sites and museums. The Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), the State Department agency responsible for planning the post-conflict stabilisation of Iraq, became involved as well. As the invasion got under way in late March – still a full two weeks before the Iraq Museum would be attacked by looters – ORHA sent Coalition headquarters a detailed list of sixteen "key Baghdad institutions" that "merit securing as soon as possible".

"Had Gibson seen the list," Rothfield writes, "he would have been very pleased":

"The National Bank, where Gibson believed some of the museum's treasures to be secreted, is first on the list, the museum second. The Ministry of Oil, which ultimately was guarded, is sixteenth. With a sense of urgency, the memo noted that the National Museum 'contains literally thousands of priceless historical objects' and predicted that '[it] will be a prime target for looters,' who 'should be

arrested and detained.' 'Coalition forces must secure these facilities,' the memo warned, 'in order to prevent looting and the resulting irreparable loss of cultural treasures.'"

So what happened? It is one of the merits of Rothfield's meticulous account that it shies away from a simple explanation. Instead, *The Rape of Mesopotamia* shows, again and again, how communications failed, how signals were missed, how mutual suspicion between archaeologists and museum officials prevented the formation of a more unified front for dealing with the byzantine Washington bureaucracy.

Within the Bush administration, Rothfield suggests, it was far from clear that, had the US Central Command drawn up clear plans to do so, the museum would have been protected. Following the looting, ORHA officials were told that the list of Baghdad institutions sent to Coalition commanders in late March "had not even been read". And it was not until April 16, nearly a week after the galleries and store-rooms were breached and following days of punishing international press coverage, that US troops got around to securing the museum compound. Worst of all, weeks and months later, looters continued to ransack sites all over southern Iraq, largely without any interference from American and British forces; the US itself set up a major military base at Babylon, causing wholly avoidable damage to Iraq's most famous historic site.

Confronted with such details, one is tempted to regard the Iraq Museum disaster as but another example of the abysmal mismanagement of the whole Iraq conflict (although the book unfortunately leaves unexplored the thinking of senior US officials like the repeatedly-warned Crocker). But in showing how even prominent cultural actors were consigned to irrelevance, Rothfield suggests a more specific problem at work. In earlier epochs, expertise in art and archaeology, whether in British Mandate Iraq or among US forces fighting in Europe in the Second World War, was considered a vital dimension of both military strategy and postwar governance. Even today, countries like Italy and Iran have special paramilitary forces trained

in heritage protection. (The Italian Carabinieri played a courageous and largely unheralded part in arresting looters during their deployment in Iraq's Dhi Qar province.) In contrast, in the US and Britain, archaeologists, scholars and museum officials have long been divorced from the foreign policy and military arms of government. As a result they not only lacked real influence in Iraq; they were largely ill-equipped to deal with armed conflict in any case.

Since the looting of the Iraq Museum, the US government has begun taking steps of its own to avoid another disaster: some troops are now given basic training in ancient heritage before deployment, and last fall the US Senate quietly ratified the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

Of course, in an age of unmanned drones, bunker-busting bombs and unpredictable insurgencies, sceptics argue that these steps will have little effect on the conduct of war. For many archaeologists and curators today, the idea that cultural policy needs to be remilitarised is highly suspect. The introduction of Human Terrain Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan – part of a Pentagon programme to embed trained anthropologists in combat brigades – has alarmed academics. More dramatically, in July 2008, the World Archaeological Congress passed a resolution urging its members to deny the Pentagon any assistance in identifying ancient sites in Iran, on the grounds that it might "provide cultural credibility and respectability to... military action".

Yet even rudimentary information-sharing can avert the unnecessary destruction of sites and monuments; until cultural institutions and universities confront the chasm that now exists between them and the military – and address the complicated ethical dilemmas warfare poses for cultural preservation – it is unlikely that the policy disaster Rothfield documents so well can be prevented from happening again.

Hugh Eakin has written about museums and the antiquities trade for The New York Review of Books, The New Yorker and The New York Times.

review

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Amount, in dollars, allocated to cancer research in the 2010 United States Federal Budget

Scientific American

The Nobel Prize-winning biologist Harold Varmus is a master researcher and a canny politician. Daniel Kevles considers the Obama adviser's vision for restoring the dignity of public science

The presidency of George W Bush was, on the whole, an unhealthy time for public science in America. Funding was part of the problem: the Bush administration's devotion to tax cuts and penchant for expensive wars took away from federally-funded research and development, especially in areas not crudely linkable to national security. But what distressed scientists most was the regular dismissal of authoritative scientific evidence. Of course, every administration refracts scientific advice through a political lens, but the Bush administration raised the practice to unprecedented levels. At times it was nakedly partisan, subjecting potential appointees to political litmus tests. Far more disturbing, it persistently censored, distorted and manipulated policy-relevant scientific information and counsel, usually because it conflicted with its go-it-alone foreign policy or its fealty to the religious right and corporate supporters.

Examples are legion, and they exist at every level of decision-making and influence. For international observers, the most offensive instances were those in which disregard for objectivity poisoned foreign policy. Bush scrapped the international Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty for the sole purpose of building an expensive national missile defence system, despite the long-standing prediction of scientists and engineers that it could not work. He repudiated American participation in the international effort to combat global warming, announcing in March 2001 that the United States would no longer abide by the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on the emission of greenhouse gases. The first President Bush had signed the agreement in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, but his son feared it would harm the carbon-spewing American economy. And though Bush eventually acknowledged that global warming was occurring, his administration cast systematic doubt on the broad scientific consensus that it is caused by human actions. The breaking of Kyoto infuriated the world's leaders: Bush was in effect asserting that the United States, which then emitted one-quarter of the world's greenhouse gases, had the right to pervert the atmosphere covering every other nation.

In February of 2004, the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a statement declaring that the Bush administration had, to a greater extent than any previous American presidency, "disregarded the principle that the contributions of science to public policy decisions must always be weighed from an objective and impartial perspective". When the President's science adviser, John Marburger, a Democrat and respected physicist, responded to this line of criticism by saying he knew of no "administration policies that are in conflict with science", he was written off as a mere apologist. Eventually, the statement criticising the administration was signed by some 8,000 scientists, including 20 Nobel laureates.

One of those 20 was Harold Varmus, who had served as director of the National Institute of Health (NIH) for most of the Clinton administration, and thereafter as director of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, one of the world's leading institutions in its field. Given his past position, Varmus watched the Bush administration mangle science policy and hamstringing research with perhaps even more dismay than most. He wrote his new memoir, *The Art and Politics of Science*, partly in the hope that the story of his experiences in science, policy and the intersection of the two would be of use to whoever would guide the nation after the 2008 presidential election. Now it certainly will: on December 20, 2008, Barack Obama announced the appointment of Varmus, who had advised him during the election campaign, as co-chair



Harold Varmus receives the National Medal of Science in 2002; as the former head of the National Institute of Health, Varmus watched with dismay as George W Bush mangled science policy. Doug Mills / AP Photo

of his Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.



The Art and Politics of Science is an engaging read, fascinating as a memoir of Varmus's personal and scientific journeys, revealing in its account of his stewardship of the NIH. The book is like the man – honest and clear-eyed, thoughtful and outspoken, always good company, with more than a frequent touch of humour and self-deprecation.

Varmus attributes much of his success in life and science to having "been dealt some very good cards". The first good cards came from being born into a comfortable, educated family on New York's Long Island. After college he enrolled in a PhD programme in English literature at Harvard, but he soon switched to medicine, lured by the excitement of studying the body. In 1968, at the end of his medical residency, he opted to spend two years doing research at the NIH, then an appealing haven from service in the Vietnam War, which Varmus "fervently opposed"; he and his fellow refugees from the conflict called themselves the "Yellow Berets". It was at the NIH that Varmus first developed his desire to understand the causes of cancer – in part because his mother had been diagnosed with the disease.

He drew another fortunate card from the deck when, in 1970, he joined the staff of the University of California San Francisco Medical School as a collaborator of Michael Bishop. The immediate goal of their first project was to determine how a microorganism called the Rous Sarcoma Virus provokes cancer in chickens. This involved the dauntingly difficult task of detecting whether, after a chicken was infected, the virus's small complement of genes was present anywhere among the thousand of chicken genes. Varmus and Bishop were aided by the work of colleagues at several institutions in the West Coast Tumor Virus Cooperative, which they helped form. By the mid-1970s, their findings led them to the speculation, confirmed within a few years, that viruses are not actually required for the genesis of cancer – that in many organisms, including human beings, the disease is caused by the perversion of normal genes into oncogenes, genes that enable cells to generate tumours.

This finding was revolutionary. At

the time, cancer was treated exclusively with chemical poisons applied to the whole body (whole-body application is why chemotherapy usually makes people feel awful). But precise knowledge of what has gone haywire in a cancerous cell laid the groundwork for "rational" targeting of the disease. Even now, 20 years after Varmus and Bishop won the Nobel Prize for their discovery, blunderbuss chemotherapies remain the rule; the line between empirical breakthrough and widespread practical application is rarely straight or short. But Varmus expects, quite reasonably, that the future lies with therapies that inhibit specific oncogenes. One such therapy, Gleevec, is already available: it is taken as a pill, is highly efficacious in five different cancers, and causes only mild side effects.

Varmus's Nobel brought him into the world of science policy via advisory committees and the like; he enjoyed it, and jumped at the chance to head up the NIH when asked. During the Clinton years, the institute enjoyed strong support from Congress, which regularly increased its budget above the president's annual recommendation. Varmus was a popular, admired director. Unpretentious with staff and straightforward with politicians, he wore khakis, kept his collar open and made a point of eating often in the agency's cafeteria.

One of the tragedies of the Bush years is that "the politics of science" came to mean exclusively "the distortion of scientific findings for political ends"

An avid biker, he was well-known for regularly pedalling the 12 miles from his Washington home to the NIH campus in Maryland; in 1994, he was named Montgomery County Commuter of the Year.

Of course, managing a sprawling \$11 billion agency involves more than being a nice guy on a bike, or even being a brilliant scientist. It means being a politician: deciding how a finite amount of resources should be allocated – then arguing with people who have different views on the matter. In this sense science is *always* political, always caught up in a broader discourse about what ought to be done. One of the tragedies of the Bush years is that "the politics of science" came to mean exclusively "the distortion of scientific findings for political ends".

Varmus is intimately familiar with just how impoverished the public discourse on science presently is. So he is sure to make clear the baseline conditions he takes to be essential for optimal science policy-making: merit rather than partisanship in appointments, open-mindedness rather than rigid, religiously-motivated restrictions when defining options, and a commitment to relying only on objective conclusions (not distortions of same) when making science-related decisions. These are simple principles, unexceptional prescrip-

tions against know-nothingism that only require articulation now because Bush violated them so often and so casually.

In addition to these basic precepts, Varmus puts forth several nuanced and compelling examples of how the thinking of scientists can influence basic policy decisions. For example, Varmus's NIH came under criticism from Congress for spending more on Aids than on heart disease, despite the fact that heart disease killed 20 times more Americans each year. Varmus defended the inequality of expenditures as perhaps only an authoritative scientist could. First, he noted that Aids, unlike heart disease, was an infectious, easily spreadable threat to public health in many parts of the world. Second, and perhaps less intuitively, he argued that the incidence and cost, both human and financial, of particular diseases are only "crude tools for deciding how to spend research dollars appropriately". It makes more sense, he explained, to place budgetary bets on research programs that might reveal basic biological mechanisms and the ways that these mechanisms fail. Mindful of how he and Bishop came to discover oncogenes, he notes here that far-flung, relatively slow-moving investigations of the biology of yeast, worms, flies and mice can yield as much practical knowledge of human biology and disease as studies of human cells. In the end, the budget was a political decision, but a deep understanding of the art of science helped make it a good one.



On March 9, at a White House press conference with Varmus and others on stage, Obama announced a Presidential Memorandum intended to restore "scientific integrity to government decision-making", and to ensure that his government appoints science advisers "based on their credentials and experience, not their politics or ideology". The President explained that "promoting science isn't just about providing resources – it is about protecting free and open inquiry... free from manipulation or coercion, and listening to what [scientists] tell us, even when it's inconvenient – especially when it's inconvenient."

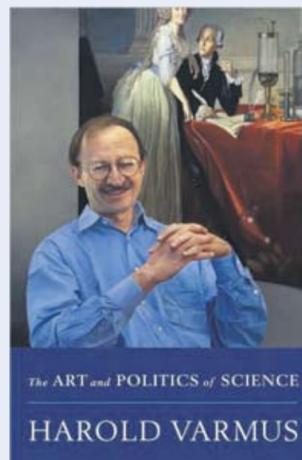
So far, so good: Obama wants to listen to scientists instead of shutting them up or telling them what

to say. This does not, of course, settle the question of what ought to be done next: that's politics. Varmus, expressing his own commitments on that front, wants to put global health high on Obama's agenda. He finds it deplorable that the United States gives less foreign aid (in terms of percentage of GDP) than any other of the 22 most developed countries in the world – and that only 12 per cent of that aid goes toward public health initiatives. He notes with admiration the efforts of philanthropies, most notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to fill the gap, but remains convinced that the American government should do a great deal more, incorporating global health science into its broader foreign policy aims.

With an eye to Bush's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (one of his administration's few scientific success stories), Varmus has already called for the allocation of \$15 billion to the NIH by 2012 for research into diseases that afflict the Third World. He has also specifically instructed American scientists to build more cooperative networks with their counterparts around the globe. Perhaps most ambitiously, he advocates the creation of a Global Science Corps that would place scientists from advanced countries in laboratories in developing countries.

On May 5, Obama – perhaps responding to a high-ranking White House aide, perhaps to Varmus, perhaps to both – proposed that the United States undertake a broad, \$63 billion, six-year programme of global health. "It is fair to say," he told a reporter late in March, "that most Americans believe that we are lucky people. Even though we're in the middle of a terrible downturn at the moment, we lead much better lives than somebody who is struggling in an African village, and we have an ethical responsibility to do something about that. It doesn't take a lot of our time and money to make a big difference." Neither a mastery of politics nor a Nobel Prize in biology is necessary to possess the moral conviction that helping people is right, but we should take heart from the fact that Harold Varmus has all three.

Daniel Kevles, a historian at Yale University, is currently completing a history of innovation and intellectual property protection.



The Art and Politics of Science
Harold Varmus
WW Norton & Co
Dh100



The present state of Plot 128-4, a humble 4,000 square metre patch of unoccupied land in downtown Beirut that will someday be the site of the Omani-funded House of Arts and Culture. Photograph by Bryan Denton for the National

Monument valley

Is Beirut's new cultural centre just a receptacle for impossible dreams? Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reports

On the southern edge of downtown Beirut lies a tiny scrap of empty land known as Plot 128-4. On one side, it bumps up against the elevated high-speed ring road that runs parallel to the coast and whisks traffic between East Beirut and West. On the other, it slopes down to a small street, beyond which is a public square arranged around an enormous old Ficus tree.

A hundred years ago this area was a suburb. Fifty years ago it was a slum. During the civil war it was abandoned, and afterward it was destroyed: in 1994, the real-estate company Solidere, which was established to carry out the urban renewal of Beirut's city centre, flattened everything in this area except for one building, a pink house with white trim that dates back to the French Mandate and looks like a birthday cake. Plot 128-4 doesn't seem like much at the moment, other than a 4,000-square-metre parcel of tall grass and weeds. The neighbourhood is empty, and no one is using the adjacent public square except for a single security guard from a private firm, one of many in Solidere's small army of enforcers, who habitually stashes his newspaper, his lunch, a few coffee cups and a spare uniform in the gnarled folds of the Ficus tree's trunk.

If all goes as planned, this humble spot will host a world-class cultural centre for the visual and performing arts by 2013. But to envision the future of Plot 128-4, as at any other site in downtown Beirut slated for eventual development – including Martyrs' Square, the Souqs of Beirut, the new waterfront marina and the so-called Garden of Forgiveness, all of which have been in the works for years – requires imagination and a willing suspension of disbelief.

Imagine a building made of graduated white stone, oxidised copper and glass. Imagine a ramp zigzagging down the slope of the land like a scar. Imagine a design that gives material expression to a notion the architects call "trafic optimism". Imagine a smooth flow between interior and exterior space. Imagine modular exhibition rooms, two performance halls, a cinema, a library, a documentation centre and more. Imagine these spaces animated. Imagine them popular.

For all the cultural vitality of the Lebanese capital, Beirut has never had an art space of this size and scale. The city has neither a modern

art museum nor a contemporary art institute. Public funding for culture is meagre, and there is virtually no government-sponsored infrastructure for the arts. The city is home to a critical mass of artists, writers, curators, choreographers, theatre directors and filmmakers – but when they present their work to the public, they usually do so by borrowing, renting or appropriating spaces such as commercial galleries, old movie theatres or derelict and abandoned buildings. Under the auspices of Solidere, the downtown district has been more or less cleared of culture in favour of commerce. By necessity and design, the art scene since the start of the reconstruction era has thrived outside of the city centre, and it has established its own infrastructure without support or interference from the state. The new visual and performing arts centre is unusual, then, not only because it will be located downtown on Solidere's turf, but also because it is being conceived and executed by a government agency, namely, Lebanon's ministry of culture.

Among the many development projects that are on the drawing board in Beirut, this one – variously known as the House of Arts and Culture, Dar Bayrut or the Lebanese-Omani Centre – is of relatively recent vintage. The idea was hatched four years ago, during a conversation between Lebanon's prime minister, Fouad Siniora, and Tarek Mitri, who served as the minister of culture from 2005 to 2008.

"The two of us thought that Beirut needed a concert hall, a museum of modern art, a historical archaeological museum, the revival of the national library project and a house of arts and culture," recalls Mitri. "So I wrote a few papers. Fouad Siniora said, 'We'll never get the money for this here.' It's true. You can't go to cabinet ministers and ask them for \$25 million. These projects are important but maybe not urgent."

In early 2006, Siniora travelled to the Gulf to seek financing for these five cultural initiatives. The Sultanate of Oman pledged \$20 million for the House of Arts and Culture. Tapping external donors for internal projects is nothing new in Lebanon (though foreign money has historically fuelled war rather than museums). Neither is it unusual for the Gulf states to be generous with their

wealth – in the form of humanitarian aid, post-war reconstruction, or massive real-estate investment.

But obtaining the funds proved less difficult than selecting a location. According to Mitri, "quite a few people didn't like the location in downtown Beirut. There was a strong argument against it, and I was not oblivious to it. But I came to be an advocate of downtown because the House of Arts and Culture must be accessible to all: north, south, east and west. Symbolically, downtown is the meeting place par excellence."

These plans unfolded against a backdrop of political chaos: the 33-day war with Israel in the summer of 2006, the opposition protest encampment that took over downtown Beirut for more than a year, and the outbreak of street fighting in May 2008. At one point, recalls Mitri, "I thought, should we go ahead with this?"

But a few months after the brokering of the Doha Accord, which brought Lebanon's latest crisis to a close, Mitri travelled to Turin, where he launched an international competition for the House of Arts and Culture during a general assembly meeting for the Union of International Architects (UIA). More than 750 initial entries from 63 countries came pouring in.

In March 2009, a jury convened in Beirut to consider 388 final entries, and awarded the commission to an Italian team led by the architect Alberto Catalano. According to UIA regulations, the Lebanese government is obliged to contract Catalano for his design – a seemingly minor detail, but one that may be critical if the project is to survive Lebanon's frequent political storms.

If the House of Arts and Culture actually succeeds, it will be an unprecedented achievement. But there are several reasons to be sceptical. The first is political. Long-term planning is, in general, a luxury that few cultural figures in Lebanon can afford, as they are always facing the possibility of the next government stalemate or collapse, the next political assassination or explosion, and the next local or regional war. Lebanon is holding parliamentary elections on June 7, after which the current government – culture minister included – will automatically resign. Who knows what the next government will look like, or who

the next culture minister will be?

The second and third reasons to doubt the feasibility of the project are structural and financial. The gift of \$20 million from Oman is barely enough to cover the cost of construction, to say nothing of the money required to outfit and equip a cultural space capable of hosting high-quality exhibitions and concerts. The model mentioned repeatedly in conversations about the House of Arts and Culture in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. But the differences between them are vast, not least because the project in Beirut is a kunsthalle-style venue with no collection and just 1,100 square metres of exhibition space; the Centre Pompidou, by contrast, is a museum with a collection of 53,000 works and 14,000 square metres in which to display them.

According to Angus Gavin, the head of Solidere's urban planning division, who sketched out an early feasibility study for Plot 128-4, "\$20 million is just enough to do a building. But a cultural building? It's not enough, and it will take another \$1 million a year just to run it."

Even if the House of Arts and Culture gets built, there is little to suggest that anyone involved has any idea what will happen there, or how. At present, the centre has no director, no board of trustees, no executive committee and no infrastructure whatsoever. The culture ministry has no track record of carrying such a project to fruition. There are no proposals for fund-raising, staffing, programming or operating expenses. Beyond the generic and the vague, there is no artistic vision for the centre. In four years' time, Plot 128-4 might become a beautiful building. But architecture alone does not guarantee active cultural engagement. Consider the case of Lebanon's National Museum, which was gorgeously restored after the civil war and boasts a comprehensive collection of antiquities. On any given day, the museum is empty, and as silent as the long-forsaken stage set.

At the moment, there may be no structure for the House of Arts and Culture, but there are several hands in the proverbial pot. One is GAIA Heritage, the consulting firm that was contracted to conduct the competition. Another is Solidere. Another is an organising committee that Mitri created to shepherd the project from his term as culture minister to that of his successor,

which consists of four volunteers, the director-general of antiquities Frederic Hussein, and the culture minister himself.

Talking to all of the different parties involved, it is difficult to ascertain who is really in charge. Tamam Salam, who succeeded Mitri as culture minister, insists that the House of Arts and Culture is the ministry's affair. "The representative body for this project is the Ministry of Culture, and it will be the Ministry of Culture all the way through. Certainly we imagine creating an administrative council or a governing board," he adds, explaining that a few months ago, "we enacted laws to govern the relations between different institutions in the country and the government, such as concert halls, museums and libraries." Such laws should allow greater autonomy for such institutions – including, possibly, the National Museum – while keeping them in line with the culture ministry's regulations.

Among Beirut's community of artists and cultural figures, however, there is little enthusiasm for the project: few believe it will ever happen, and even fewer understand why the Omani donation is funding form (the building itself) rather than function (the activities on the inside).

Many of Beirut's artists believe, furthermore, that the strength of the city's art scene has derived precisely from the lack of state support. "Beirut is one of the rare instances where you find forms of art that are generated out of a need to experiment," the artist Akram Zaatari once said. "The current art scene was born in times when the experience of museums was being questioned. The challenge was precisely to look for alternatives to those missing channels.... We have been producing work without museums, so why should we need them now?"

The indifference of Beirut's artists raises a thorny question: If it is not for the people who give Beirut its cultural vitality, then who is the project really for? What is its purpose and does Beirut actually need it?

Samir Khalaf, a sociologist at the American University of Beirut who has written several books about the city, argues that it does need such an institution. "Art can bring together people who harbour all kinds of fears and paranoias about one another," he says. "It is not only

existential but also transcendental. How can the Lebanese cultivate a genuine interest in art? As the youth are breaking away from family and community, as they are becoming disaffected by politics, where do they go? Where is the public sphere emerging? We must create a venue that breaks away from politics. We must use this house to reach out. We have to reach the young."

But the House of Arts and Culture, like so many unfulfilled projects, also seems like a receptacle for impossible dreams. To read through the brief that was prepared for the architectural competition is to encounter a litany of ambitions: to educate, to advance, to assert, to project, to lead, to influence. The House of Arts and Culture, like many of the new cultural initiatives, art spaces and museums taking shape in the Middle East, is heavily burdened with responsibilities that relate more to the experience of citizenship and modernity than to the beholding of art.

"We have nothing," says Rita Ragavlas, a lawyer with experience in heritage preservation who is a volunteer with the organising committee set up by Mitri. "We're starting from nothing and building up and it's going very fast. I'm sure when we have the building and we start operating people will be happy, because no one can imagine that we will have something like this, such a variety of things, of styles. This is where we are going to see marvellous things. Other projects, those are museums. Here you'll have the action. This is the difference. Can you imagine? This a dream for us."

But the artist Walid Sadek points out that Lebanon has an entire storehouse of projects that are planned and but remain unfulfilled, and that these projects are all somehow symptomatic of a broken state that chronically, pathologically, imagines itself whole. "The reason we can't move on is because we are incapable of mourning as a society, and I think the question we have to ask of all these projects is will they be conducive to mourning?" he says. "What is happening here is not a city but the building of monuments. It seems we can't live in Lebanon unless we are in the shadow of monuments."

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie writes for The Review from Beirut.

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Milk

Milking a camel, Abu Dhabi, 2009 |
Photograph by Andrew Henderson

Saudi Arabia's got talent

Nathan Deuel watches the would-be famous queue up for the Kingdom's first open casting call

"You ready to rock?" asks Todd Albert Nims, his electric, American grin parting a week's worth of fashionable beard. We're arrayed in a rented-out conference room. Looking nervous but resigned, the sad-eyed Somali cameraman nods, the wiry Filipino tech fires up the klieg lights, and I sit back and hold my breath.

For the first time in its modern history, Saudi Arabia is the site of an open casting call. Standard in Los Angeles, Berlin, London, Mumbai and other cultural capitals, the auditions were being held at a Holiday Inn Hotel converted from a compound that once held the staff of British Airways, which suspended operations in Saudi during the troubles from 2003 to 2006, when dozens of expatriates were killed in bombings and gunshot executions.

But it's 2009, and things have changed: British Airways resumed flights to Saudi Arabia at the end of May; the tourism ministry is making noises about increasing visitors; the religious police recently apologised for cuffing a man who allegedly kissed his wife; and every day, women at a mall in downtown Riyadh saunter the halls, their hair uncovered.

Not only is Riyadh the site of an open audition, the call is being held to staff an intriguing project: "Almost a Rock Band," a comedy about four 18-year-old Riyadh boys' quixotic dreams of becoming guitar gods in Saudi's strict social climate.

All the layers of meaning in this premise – and the casting call – are enjoyable enough, but they also carry a hint of danger. After all, this is still a country without movie theatres, a place where gatherings of any kind, aside from prayer, can raise eyebrows.

Allaying my fears of a morality-police beatdown is Ali, Todd's co-writer, a hipster Saudi in his 20s with a faux-hawk, jaunty scarf and nonprescription nerd glasses. "I know the red lines," Ali tells me nonchalantly.

The guy has the real dope, or at least claims to. He's an employee at the IT department of mega-channel MBC. He says that when typical Saudi TV shows or movies are in planning stages, the producers and directors simply pick their friends.

"They don't do casting," he says, laughing. "It's all on your looks, and who you know."

Moments later, the first audition of the morning gets underway. Todd and Ali have never met Khalid, a barrel-chested 31-year-old Saudi in a smart polo shirt, crisp jeans and expensive leather trainers. He's simply responded to the call, which was spread via Facebook, e-mail and flyers.

"Can you do impressions?" Todd asks.

Khalid begins to personify "Merito man", a Saudi stereotype referring to a vain young mall-walker cruising for female attention whose headdress is so stiff with Merito-brand starch he can barely turn his head.

"That's just great," Todd says, guffawing. "I think we're gonna give you the part. You're in."

As Khalid exits stage right, Ali fumes. This is the first audition! The American is moving too fast. "I was getting excited", Todd admits.

Tensions soothed, Ali and Todd sit back for round two. But something is wrong. I witness the panicked entrance of Youssef, a slick-haired Saudi from Gulf Casting, the just-founded talent company running its first casting call. He begins whispering to Ali, whose face turns white.

"We'll have to do it again, in a compound," I hear Todd say.

The potential actors keep coming in not really knowing why they're here, other than to get famous

We all pour into the hotel corridor. In the lobby, women who have gathered for the audition – either vying for a part or just out of curiosity – are scattering, panicked. I see the slow, angry approach of the hotel's general manager, a portly man in a yellow dress shirt as wide as it is tall. Then I overhear Todd whisper to Ali: "I think it was just a girl kissing people on the cheek."

Perhaps carried away by the filmset atmosphere (or the thrill of seeing boys), one of the female audition attendees had apparently begun greeting people in the European fashion, and nervous hotel management had put a stop to it. Despite his hunky brio, Todd looks shaken. We all file back into the room, where the humbled work of artistic recruitment resumes.

The next candidate is Daoud, a 36-year-old advertising executive. He's half-Saudi, half-American and carries himself like a teenaged grizzly bear, his great brown thobe barely concealing his girth and mirth. He makes eye contact with every one of us as he strides the room, acting out the bizarre antics of a teacher he once had.

"I'm not positive I'm a genius," he says by way of conclusion. "But everyone tells me that I'm a genius. I just need to be comfortable to show it."

After Daoud comes 17-year-old Ali, a diminutive shovel-faced Saudi with baggy jeans and the bearing of a skate punk. Sitting there slouched and confident, he's got so much attitude he can barely get his words out of a marble-filled scowl. "What can you do for us?" Todd asks. "I don't know," the young Ali says.

Next is Firaz, 25, an articulate Indian national with bold eyebrows and the square shoulders of an athlete. "I'm very good at mathematics," he deadpans.

"Nobody told you what the film was about?" Todd asks, seething. He glares at Youssef, who grins sheepishly. The potential actors keep coming in not really knowing why they're here, other than to get famous. The casting agents, such as they are, struggle with the concept of standardised preparation, and instead seem to play favourites, protect access to processes and generally keep things confusing. There are photo-copied handouts meant to brief each candidate, but those are sitting in the other room, undistributed. Youssef makes excuses. "Oh, they don't speak English, so we just told

them what the show is about."

As the candidates stream through over the next few hours – a 19-year-old Somali chattering with fright, two 35-year-old Saudis who painfully overact, then a cocky Lebanese guy in his 20s whose jokes make no sense – it becomes clear to me that, to some extent, Todd and Ali are trolling for basic competency. In the end, maybe they'll be pleasantly surprised by the energy and dedication of people they get. But for most of the day in this hotel – already busted by the management, the women scattered – their characters' dreams of stardom seems as far-fetched as the show's chances itself.

I catch Todd at lunch. He tells me about being born in Dhahran, the American child of Aramco employees. College was at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Then it was on to Los Angeles. He tells me if the pilot gets bought, he'll make a permanent move to Riyadh. "You make a change here, you change a prince's mind," he says of Saudi Arabia, shuddering at the memory of LA's shallow glitzville. "Then you can change the world."

At one point, seeking caffeine, I find myself in the waiting room among the hopefuls waiting to be called upon. Boys and men in thobes chain-smoke and talk, their sandals on the floor, bare feet tucked up under folded legs. I make my way to the espresso machine and fumble with it. An intense-looking Saudi from the casting call strides over to help, his fingernails rimmed dark with dirt, and his lips dyed brown with tobacco smoke.

Back in the audition room, this same boy, Saleh, is up. He's 18 years old, and in the well-lit room, he looks like a kind of Arab James Dean. In Arabic, Ali asks him to show us a scene. He strides around the room in agony, miming a scene of his own arrest with furious absorption. It's a riveting performance. When he's finished, he flashes the would-be directors a blinding smile. After he's gone, we all sit there in stunned silence, and for a brief moment Saudi Arabia seems as if it might indeed be what Todd hopes it is – an undiscovered country.

Nathan Deuel, a frequent contributor to The Review, is at work on a book about walking from New York to New Orleans.