

BEIRUT



SAMIR KASSIR

TRANSLATED BY M. B. DEBEVOISE | FOREWORD BY ROBERT FISK

Beirut

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FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

Robert Fisk

The story of Beirut is in many ways as tragic and as wonderful as Samir Kassir's life. Admired, exalted, free-spirited, dedicated to the intellect and to social progress, ancient Beirut with its Roman law school was as famous as Ottoman Beirut with its boulevards and flourishing academies and newspapers, and as renowned as the art deco Mandate capital of France's hopeless *Grand-Liban*. Yet it was destroyed by earthquakes, surrounded by armies, its people massacred from the Crusades to the 1975–90 civil war, in five Israeli invasions and in thirty-four years of Syrian military hegemony.

Samir Kassir flew like a moth through the last chapter of Lebanon's history, feted, admired, jealously despised, a beacon of freedom in a place without oxygen, his genius almost inevitably consumed by his country's violence. At forty-five, he was a journalist's dream: writer, philosopher, academic, intellectual, reporter. Yes, he was also what we would call a street reporter, fighting off threatening calls from the secret police while condemning the Syrian intelligence apparatus. And it ended in the Alfa Romeo, registration number 165670, so carelessly parked opposite his home in Beirut on the morning of 2 June 2005.

Now I was the reporter, filing to the London *Independent* as if my colleague were just another assassination target—which, in one sense, he was—the latest Beirut victim, and there I was interviewing the eyewitnesses like any crime reporter. “‘He always left home at 10:30 A.M. and I saw him walking across the street,’ a female neighbour told me. ‘He opened the door of his car, sat inside and started the engine. Then the car blew up.’ Close inspection . . . showed clearly that the blast came from beneath the driver's seat. It tore open the roof, blasted out the driver's door, smashed the steering column and hurled Kassir onto the passenger seat. The ig-

niton apparently detonated the bomb.” It was a shock that no one in Beirut expected—except, of course, the assassins. After the Saint Valentine’s Day murder of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, we all thought Lebanon’s assassins—with a UN international tribunal on their tail—were in their rabbit holes, fearful of arrest. But no, they were still on operational duty, still in killing mode. The moth had flown too close to the candle.

In retrospect, I think that Samir Kassir misunderstood his future killers. He had clearly identified them before he died. For him, they were the Syrian military-intelligence apparatus—apparently defeated after the outcry that followed Hariri’s killing—and the Ba’thist power, which crushed any serious freedoms in Lebanon with the help of its Lebanese collaborators (who in Kassir’s mind included the Syrian-supported President Émile Lahoud). As an internationalist, Kassir believed he had mortally offended these men—they were, inevitably, all men—because he broke the bounds of the narrow Arab nationalism which the Middle East dictatorships clung to so faithfully for their survival. He sought democracy in Syria—he was half-Syrian—as well as in Lebanon.

But because of his misunderstanding, Kassir broke one of the cardinal rules of journalism. As a reporter or columnist, you can take on governments or armies or corrupt politicians or secret policemen or clergymen or multinationals. But the one thing reporters must *never* attempt is to take on organized crime. They will never win. They will be eliminated, liquidated, murdered, burned without any compunction. You can take on the big city boss. But you cannot fight the mafia. Only states can do that, nations with powerful and uncorrupted police forces and armies, acting under national orders or UN instructions. Kassir saw his adversaries as political enemies—corrupt but amenable, in the end, to some kind of law—or as venal paramilitaries who could ultimately be brought to heel, humiliated in the face of rational argument and the force of law.

But Kassir’s enemies were much bigger than that. They created and lived in a world of bribery and stolen wealth, which spread like a web over the Middle East, to Egypt, to Iraq, to Jordan, even to Israel. To offend Syria was to offend the Saudis. And the Iranians. And the party hacks who supported Syria—and were financially sustained by Syria—within Lebanon itself. This was not about individuals. I don’t believe that the Arab kings and princes—nor President Bashar al-Assad of Syria—ever personally gave orders for the murder of prominent journalists or politicians (the slaughter of vast masses of rebellious citizens in the region—nationalist or Islamist—is quite another matter). We are talking about corporate crime.

This involves a multimillion-dollar nexus of wealth which defends itself against any assault. Money protects itself, ruthlessly and lethally. The pen is not mightier than the sword. The sword is far more powerful. Special pleading on behalf of Renaissance men—for the literary, historical, brave figures who should be able to cure the malaise of the Arab world—is useless. This was the reason for Kassir’s death.

It is not difficult to see why this malaise—he often used the word—fascinated and appalled Kassir. He loved the way in which Western culture infused itself into the Arab world, through novels and French philosophy, in the nineteenth century, and he never forgot that this flowering occurred during the last years of the Ottoman Empire. Though no imperialist, Kassir saw the Ottomans as the key to both Arab hope and Arab tragedy, and it is no surprise that his chapters on Ottoman Beirut are by far the most revealing in this massive history of the city in which he lived—for most of his life—and in which he died. One of the great ironies of his death was that those who mourned him began their statistics of murdered writers with the journalists demanding Lebanese independence who were hanged by the Turks in Beirut during the First World War, in what—after them—is now called Place des Martyrs.

His Palestinian-Syrian origins, his Lebanese-French citizenship, made Kassir an internationalist. That the Lebanese security apparatus should have temporarily confiscated his passport at Beirut airport not long before his murder—to discover to what “use” it had been put—was an insult that the intelligence authorities probably did not fully comprehend. This, after all, was a journalist who began writing for a newspaper (the Lebanese Communist Party’s *Al-Nida*) at the age of seventeen, who had spent nineteen years writing for *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and who edited the frenetic *Le Liban en Lutte*—it supported Lebanese resistance movements during the initial Israeli invasion and occupation of 1982–83—and ran a political-cultural monthly, *L’Orient-Express*, until its advertisers turned against it in the late ’90s. He wrote about Arabs rather than Arab nations; he explored the history of the Palestinians within the Arab world rather than within the narrow framework of Arafat’s nationalism. Kassir’s real passport was international.

There is little doubt that he was the bravest of those who spoke out against Syria. No sooner had he received a threatening phone call from the then-head of Lebanese security—who was imprisoned for four years on suspicion of complicity in Hariri’s murder until suddenly released as the UN’s investigation foundered—than he was telling his readers about it. Here is what he wrote about Syria in *Being Arab*:

Suffocated for forty years under a dictatorship that, although less bloodthirsty than Iraq’s, has still brutally run it into the ground, systematically bled dry by powerful mafias, and weakened by a culture of fear, Syria is now in a position almost without equivalent in the Arab world—apart perhaps from Libya, although it doesn’t have Libya’s oil—in that it combines the corruption of the Soviet republics with a Chinese-styled closed police state. (Trans. Will Hobson [London: Verso, 2006], 20)

Lebanon—one of “the laboratories of modernity,” as he called it—could take pride in the resistance which forced Israel from its territory, but its achievement had been appropriated by “Syrian obstructiveness and Islamist activism.” Islamism of the bin Laden, Wahabi type was treated with contempt by a man who could always be de-

scribed with that old journalistic cliché “leftist.” A belief in a mere forty years of “golden” Islam—after which the rest of Islamic-Arab history had gone to pot—was a nonsense that Kassir scarcely bothered to dispute. This was a man, therefore, who would generate as many enemies as admirers. The use of that one word “mafias” touched, of course, on the reason for his own demise.

In *Beirut*, Kassir describes lovingly how the Ottoman rulers of the city paved its roads, laid down water mains, administered the law, encouraged higher education. “In its imperial phase,” he was to write elsewhere of the Ottomans, “Arab history reads like an accumulation of cultural experiments or, more precisely, as an accumulation of cultural diversity. This is hardly surprising, given that its legacy is still the basic point of reference—and legitimization—for the most divergent systems of thought. Primacy of the profane over the sacred for some, of the sacred over the profane for others, philosophical rationalism, theocratic authoritarianism, dissenting mysticism, even utopianism—nothing human is alien to the Ottoman Empire’s cultural universe” (*Being Arab*, 37). The Ottomans, he says, could embrace the Aristotelian rationalism of Averroës, the theology of Ghazali, the sociology of Ibn Khaldun.

I’m not sure if Kassir wasn’t a little too generous to the Ottomans. Theirs was not an inclusive society, although it did attempt—faithfully or unfaithfully, depending on whether you lived inside or outside the empire—to live like “us.” The Ottomans commissioned the greatest engineering feat of its time, the Suez Canal; they introduced state-of-the-art Swiss rack-and-pinion steam locomotives to haul Lebanon’s passenger trains over the mountains to Damascus—the locos still rot beside the east Beirut highway opposite the old Phalangist militia headquarters; and the sultans of Constantinople learned to paint and to play the piano. “They wanted to be like you,” Professor Kamal Salibi once told me. “So you destroyed them.” And he was right. How easily we forget that one of the successful Allied war aims in the First World War was to destroy the Ottoman Empire.

Salibi, a Protestant, is of a previous generation, although his *A House of Many Mansions* remains the prime de-mythology of the Lebanese Phoenician story, a narrative to which Kassir grants due if ritual prominence. Kassir’s classical Beirut is pompous—if slightly heavy—and his post-Crusader Beirut heavy in irony. Much as obituaries should avoid perfecting the dead, forewords should be frank about the books they introduce: Kassir recalls post-independence Beirut, with its tawdry corruptions and call girls and tatty cinemas, in accurate if bawdy and cheap detail. He treats the 1975–90 civil war with near-contempt.

Kassir’s academic background—his Sorbonne doctorate in modern history and his lectureship at the Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut—sits lightly on his work. “Arab victimhood goes beyond the ‘Why do they hate us?’ question, which Arabs would be as entitled to ask as the Americans were on the morning of September 11,” he writes with simplicity. “Inflamed by the West’s attitude to the Palestinian question,

it has incorporated other elements, notably the feeling of powerlessness and also a certain crime-novel vision of history” (*Being Arab*, 80).

Kassir’s touch with practical politics was equally light. He was a founder of Lebanon’s Democratic Left Movement, which won a seat in the 2005 elections, but which was infinitely more important as a catalyst of the protests that followed Hariri’s murder. Kassir’s party colleagues were to elevate him to martyr status after his murder—somehow “Comrade Kassir” did not suit his bon vivant lifestyle, and naming a square after him blunted his status as a historian of Beirut. He was part of the city and would surely have known how easily streets change their names in Beirut. Until 1941, there was even a Rue Pétain.

His second wife, Gisèle Khoury (Kassir was an Orthodox Christian), works for Al-‘Arabiyya television, and he left two daughters, Mayssa and Liana, by an earlier marriage. A host of Kassir journalism prizes and festivals now make his name sacred. A Samir Kassir Foundation oversees the translation of his work into English, Norwegian, and Italian.

But the Samir Kassir who lived—rather than the one who died and immediately entered the gloomy portals of Lebanon’s assassinated nobility—would be fighting for more than just political freedom. The continuing demise of the city about which he writes—with varying eloquence, to be sure—would have engaged his wrath today. For developers and the billion-dollar Solidere company, which rebuilt the center of the city—tearing down ruined Ottoman streets while carefully restoring the colonial French Mandate piles that survived the civil war—are now eating into the wreckage of the empire’s homes and villas that Kassir so admired.

Two weeks before writing this foreword, I took a walk through Kassir’s old Beirut—the streets bathed in purple and crimson bougainvillea, ancient yellow stones glowing with warmth, but their Ottoman keeps now in a state of ruin, their roofs collapsing, their marble balconies cracked, their staircases propped up with wood, their frescoed windows shaking in the wind because war-shattered glass was long ago replaced with plastic sheeting, now torn. In Lebanon, only land has value, property none. Thus it is more profitable to tear down yet more of the pride of the Sublime Porte and build another high-rise suburb. After the murder of Kassir comes the murder of the city he loved.

For thirty-four years, I have looked at these buildings as a foreigner, driving past them in the war, queued behind traffic in their canyon streets as my driver Abed—whose father was taken by the Ottomans, only days after his marriage, to fight Allenby’s army in Palestine—recalled a Beirut of cream-and-brown streetcars and cobbled streets. This, he would tell me, was the Palais Heneiné—built in 1880 by a Russian count and once the U.S. Beirut Consulate to the Ottoman Empire. And that used to be the Bustani School . . .

And indeed, there it is, the collapsing vestibule of this most famous and challenging of Beirut’s educational institutions, the first secular school of Beirut (1863)