

Restoring Horizon

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Restoring Horizon¹

Tarek Zeidan

There is something particular about explosions, whether they be bombs, or artillery, or even aerial bombardment, that relates to their destructive power. They do not only ravage the landscape, end lives, and obliterate communities, they also destroy the concept of horizon, and in the process freeze hope, time, and desire. How bitter is it that we live in a country that has experienced a taste of all three forms of destruction of horizon, in continuous and brutal fashion, for the past 40 years with no sign of abatement. How bitter that the density of ash makes it impossible for even the great fabricated historical lie of the phoenix to emerge anymore.

On August 04, 2020, the horizon was overdue for its execution. Since it happened, we have been a community on auto-pilot, thinking about every day as a singular block of time with boundaries of interrupted sleep, not being able to imagine what comes tomorrow and worrying only about the tasks of the day. Calendars and agendas are almost impossible to consult, weekly tasks and updates are willfully ignored. In the aftermath of being assaulted by our own government, mugged by our own banks, sickened by the disastrous response to a raging pandemic, now we are plunged into sickness and hunger by fire that consumed flesh and grain.

Being an activist means, in theory, that you are constantly pushing for change and that you have a vision and a plan to mobilize people and resources to solve public problems, ones that have plagued our lives and that of our communities for far too long. In our case at Helem, it was to protect and advocate for queer people plagued by discrimination and violence, to empower youth to lead their own liberation, and to shift society's values away from fear and hate. However, since the blast, the central question in my mind has been: Why bother rebuild when we do not own the future? Why invest in a place that they will always destroy? Why be resilient when resilience becomes another soporific platitude we convince ourselves is our salvation? Are we and those we fought with on the streets of Beirut since October 2019 really a

silent majority, or are we a vocal minority amidst thousands of people hellbent on ignoring reality and methodically reproducing the past? Who can win in the face of such evil?

The blast hit our community center almost immediately. The center is located some 700 meters away from the epicenter of the explosion, just on the other side of the port. The only thing left intact was the fridge. Everything else literally exploded. Even when you cannot recognize your own home in a sea of grey dust and shining glass, material damage is insignificant in light of the lives lost and bodies broken by the explosion, but it nevertheless shares their power to freeze and rewind time, back to where you started, as if your life and work meant nothing and someone reset the fourth dimension but kept all other dimensions the same.

The staff and volunteers at Helem, entered the center on August 5 at 7 a.m. No one needed to open the door for them as there were no doors or windows left. Broken and bloodied, they immediately began to clear the rubble and clean the center and plan for an emergency response. All of them were younger than 30, ignorant of the civil war, but born with the instinct to sweep glass, re-adjust plastic wrap for window frames, and salvage debris. It was as if the blast awakened a dormant auto-pilot inherited and stored in our DNA as a people, an contingency protocol that is uniquely ours. This auto-pilot cleared and cleaned the center in under 12 hours, and has been in place ever since. We have been hard at work joining the relief efforts, clearing rubble, rebuilding facades, cooking food, distributing food boxes, and raising emergency funds to cover the hundreds of people asking us to provide shelter. These activities have been the standard operations at Helem since last November, as our community reeled from malnutrition, homelessness, unemployment, and extremely deteriorating levels of mental health which no one seems to equally value. We are an organization that uses a community-led approach to human rights, and we have been struggling non-stop to keep that community from dissipating altogether and losing the progress we have done over the past two decades of hard work. There is no movement without community, not in the past, and certainly not in this new undeath that Lebanon has been forced into. In the dimmed light of this new status quo, a new question emerges: How can you continue to mobilize people to face adversity if the people are no longer there? How can you organize with them when they are leaving, or dying, or surrendering, or worse, turning on one another in despair and isolation. The crash course in

humanitarian aid and intervention which undead Lebanon has forced upon us has been the steepest learning curve of our lives, this even after we had taken the firm decision to swing Helem from working on civil and political rights to prioritizing social and economic rights, from an organization that recognizes the human rights framework to one that also embraces development as advocacy. As soon as we got the hang of how to merge human rights and development, in a hybrid and uniquely queer space in the global post-colonial south, and in the shadow of hyperinflation and a global pandemic no less; fate saw that we had to re-do all of it, in the shadow of a mushroom cloud that blotted out the sun.

Rebuilding the horizon means going back and thinking again about what change means in our new reality. How will the strategies serve the public good when the physical and geopolitical landscape won't stop roiling? As important and vital as is it to us, and as well as we have been able to adapt despite extreme limitations, working on providing humanitarian aid constantly feels like pouring water in a porous well— like trying to cure cancer with band-aids. This is perhaps the most underhandedly devastating impact of the loss of horizon, how your intellect and strategy, careful planning and sowing, connecting and communication, all stand shell-shocked in the face of the unknown. You cannot stand to look up when there is no horizon, so you look down at your feet, and work only on the here and now. This is where they want us to be, tame and defeated, reactive and not proactive, concerned with survival and not with life.

There are many adjectives that describe the dawn. Tolkien called it terrible, not to those who seek it but those who have sought its detention. Soon we will begin to think again, to plan and plot and awaken—not just for justice this time—but also for revenge. For now, we clean and clear and cook and care for one another. Soon enough, fire will give life after it consumes it. Soon, we will figure out how to erode a system from the core, and not just hurl rocks at the battlements. Soon, through trial and error, we will find what makes foundations crack. Soon, all of this will come to pass. Soon.

Tarek Zeidan is the Executive Director of Helem.

Notes

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