



Rebuilding our horizon

Tarek Zeidan

I never thought I would see a cataclysm unfold on my horizon, a scene that I had only experienced in documentaries about WWII, or some apocalyptic prelude describing the nuclear fallout that created Godzilla. Much has been written about how large explosions such as nuclear warfare, along with ethnic cleansing and aerial bombardment, destroy the concept of horizon, and in the process freeze time. How bitter is it we live in a country that has experienced a taste of all three in varying degrees over the past 40 years alone. Since the blast it has indeed been difficult to see or even imagine the horizon. Since it happened, we have been on auto-mode, 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 willfully ignored. We have been assaulted by our own police, mugged by our own banks, sickened by our own government's disastrous response to a pandemic, and now blasted to bits by its incompetence and greed. The horizon, it turns out, had been slowly dying for years.

Being an activist means, in theory, that you are constantly pushing for change. That you have a vision and a plan to mobilize people and resources to serve the common good and to solve public problems that plagued you and your community for far too long. In our case at Helem, it was to protect LGBTQ people plagued by discrimination and violence, to empower youth to lead their own liberation, and to shift society's values away from hate and phobia. 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 steal away from and eventually destroy? Why be resilient when they use that against you? Are we and those we fought with on the streets of Beirut since October really a silent majority, or are we a vocal minority amidst zounds of people hellbent on ignoring reality and methodically reproducing the past? Who can win in the face of such odds, and such evil?

The blast hit our center (Helem) almost immediately as it is located some 700 meters away from the epicenter. The only thing left intact was the fridge. Everything else was blown to bits. Material damage is insignificant in light of the lives lost and bodies broken by the explosion, but it shares with them the ability to freeze and rewind time, back to where you started, as if your life and work meant nothing and someone reset the clock against your will. The staff and volunteers at Helem, also hounded by the death of horizon, but still inexplicably durable, immediately began to clear the rubble and clean the center and plan for the emergency response. All of them are under 30, not yet born during the civil war, but like our elderly neighbors in Mar Mikhael they began to sweep glass and re-adjust window frames almost immediately while the dust was still in the air, minutes after the explosion happened. It was as if the blast awakened a dormant coping mechanism inherited and stored in our DNA as a

people, the to-do list that is uniquely triggered by explosion. This auto-mode cleared and cleaned the center in a record 24 hours, and it is how we have been functioning for the past week. We have been hard at work joining the relief efforts, clearing debris, rebuilding homes, cooking food, distributing food boxes, and raising emergency funds to cover the hundreds of people asking us to provide shelter for them. With the exception of the debris, this list of activities has been the case at Helem since last November, as our community reeled from malnutrition, homelessness, unemployment, and the silent killer that is depression. 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 2 decades of hard work. There is no movement without community, not in the past, and certainly not in this Lebanon version 2020. So the question becomes how can you continue to mobilize people if the people are no longer there? They are leaving, or dying, or surrendering, or worse turning on one another in a desperate bid to secure what resources remain. The crash course in humanitarian aid and intervention which Lebanon 2020 has forced upon us has been the steepest learning curve of our lives, this even after we had taken the firm 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.

Rebuilding the horizon means going back and thinking again about what does change mean in Lebanon version 2020. How will the strategies serve the public good when the geopolitical landscape won't stop roiling? As important and vital as is it to me, and as good of a job as we have been doing despite extreme limitations, humanitarian aid constantly feels like trying to cure cancer with band-aids. This uniquely Lebanese cancer; and the corrupt, sectarian, patriarchal, homophobic, kleptocratic locust capitalism that makes up its core, thrives on the death of horizon. It enjoys the shadows of the status quo, embraces law but despises justice, welcomes aid but resists solutions, and thrives on the ashes of its preceding incarnation as if nothing happened the day before.

Soon we will begin to think again, to plan and strategize and plot our revenge. To graduate from outrage to rage as the driver of our desire for change. For now we clean and clear and cook and care for one another. Soon enough things will change as they always do. Soon we will figure out how to erode the system at its core, and not just hurl rocks at the battlements. Soon, through trial and error, we will find what makes the foundations crack. Soon all of this will happen. Soon.

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