

Lebanon wrestles with identity crisis

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Moderated by the impressive Marc Malek, managing partner of the Conquest Capital Group, it was ably supported by among others, the equally influential Naim Abou Jaoude, chairman of New York Life Investment Management International and garnished with the caustic wit of Nassim Nicholas Taleb, guru statistician author of The Black Swan, who called for more diversity in the workforce. Mr. Taleb wanted to see more vocational schools, more entrepreneurship and less of an obsession with a college degree just for the sake of it, reminding the assembled audience that most of the great tech entrepreneurs – Gates, Jobs and Ellison – were college dropouts.

“Your kids will have a better chance of a job even if they may not get invited to dinner as often as they’d like,” he said. It was half-joking, but he highlighted the grinding insecurity that afflicts all Lebanese who equate education with social standing as much as its role in equipping people with tools for life.

But like most discussions on how to make Lebanon punch above its weight, it ran into the wall of reality. Mr. Malek reminded the assembled government guests, including foreign minister Gebran Bassil, that all this talk was hypothetical until Lebanon developed the infrastructure to service a modern business environment, and by that he meant simply having enough bandwidth to conduct a decent Skype call.

My panel’s discussion on how to exploit brand Lebanon pointed out the potential and the pitfalls of changing public perception of Lebanon as a country where bad things happen, to Lebanon, the boutique nation with exquisitely boutique products and designers. But were we Mediterranean or Arab? In other words, should we sacrifice identity for commercial safety? How could we make people fall in love with us through our cuisine and who owned hummus? Well that was always going to come up, wasn’t it? I remember wondering why no one had brought up the Lebanese poet Gibran Khalil Gibran. It was surely only a matter of time.

And there he was, in one of the closing speeches by Lena Diab, a Canadian politician of Lebanese descent, who quoted from Gibran’s “You have your Lebanon and I have my Lebanon” presumably to generate a sense of longing for the home country among the attendees and celebrate the migrant diaspora experience: “They are victorious wherever they go and loved and respected wherever they settle,” she concluded to massive applause.

What Ms. Diab failed to mention, or perhaps didn’t realize, is that Gibran goes on to describe “your” Lebanon as a country of “bragging, lying and stupidity” and of “deceit, cheating and hypocrisy”. And therein lies our curse.

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