

Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves

Excerpts from an interview with Souheil Bachar conducted by Walid Raad of The Atlas Group.

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The following videotapes were produced by
Souheil Bachar.

Souheil Bachar was kidnapped in Beirut (Lebanon)
in 1983. He was in solitary confinement for ten
years except for 27 weeks in 1985 when he was
held in the same cell with Americans Terry
Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir,
Martin Jenco, and David Jacobsen.

Tapes #17 and #31 are two of the 53 videotapes
produced by Souheil Bachar about his experiences
as a hostage, and the only tapes he makes available
for screening in North America and Western Europe.

Tape #31

Walid Raad:

Can you please identify yourself?

Souheil Bachar:

My name is Souheil Bachar. I am from the village of Houla
in South Lebanon. I am 42 years old.

Bachar:

Can you identify yourself as well?

Raad:

My name is Walid Raad. I am a media artist and teacher.
I also work with The Atlas Group, an imaginary foundation I
established in 1976 to research the contemporary history
of Lebanon.

Raad:

Can you tell us about how you came in contact with us,
The Atlas Group, and about the tapes you have produced?

Bachar:

I saw your presentation of The Atlas Group Archive in
September 1999 at the Ayloul Festival in Beirut. I was very
intrigued by your foundation's mission and by the documents
in your archive. I approached you after the presentation and
we agreed to meet and talk. After a series of meetings between
us two years ago, your foundation proposed to assist me
in the production of videotapes about my experiences as
a hostage. In the past two years, I have produced 53 short
videotapes.

Raad:

But you don't make public all 53 videotapes?

Bachar:

I have screened publicly all 53 videotapes but only in Lebanon,
Syria, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Palestine and Morocco.
Of the 53 videotapes, I allow only 2 tapes, tapes #17 and #31
to be screened in North America and Western Europe.

Raad:

Why?

Bachar:

I should mention that during my ten-year detention from 1983
to 1993, I was held for three months with 5 American men:
Terry Anderson, Benjamin Weir, Thomas Sutherland, Martin
Jenco and David Jacobsen. My detention with these men

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coincided with the "Arms for Hostages" negotiations unfolding in the mid-1980's between, among others, the US, Israel and Iran. In fact, my detention with the Americans came to an end on the day that the American Benjamin Weir was released, on September 14 1985, as a result of the first arms shipment by the US via Israel to Iran.

I should also state that after their release, many of the Western men who were held hostage in Lebanon in the 1980's have written and published books about their experiences in captivity. In fact, all five American men who were detained with me in 1985 have written books that were published in the US.

In tapes #17 and #31, I wanted to focus specifically on this aspect of my captivity, on my detention with the Americans along with my post-detention study of the writing of the story of captivity.

As to why I do not release the other tapes in North America and Western Europe, I am not interested in commenting on this matter. Furthermore, I would appreciate it if your questions in this interview deal strictly with what I examine and propose in tapes #17 and #31.

Raad:

Ok. In tape #17, you state that the tape should be dubbed with a female-voice over in the language of the host country where the tapes are screened. I have seen the tape screened in Germany, France and Italy but the female voice-over is always in English. Why?

Bachar:

No money was found for the dubbing into German, French and Italian. As a consequence, I made exceptions until funds are available.

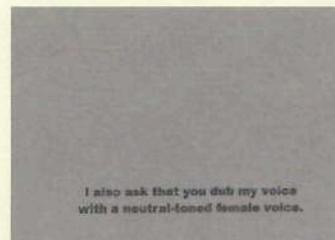
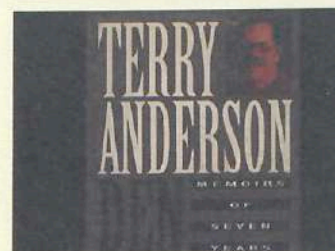
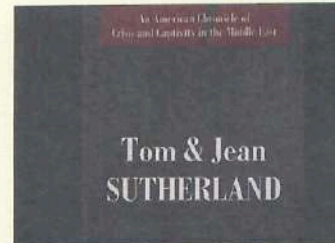
Raad:

I also noted that the English voice-over is not an accurate translation of what you say in Arabic. At times, the voice-over says the exact opposite of what you are saying in Arabic and at other times, it says something not related at all to what you are saying in Arabic. Do you translate the text yourself? And if so, why the difference between what you say in Arabic and the non-Arabic voice-over?

Bachar:

Yes, I do my own translations.

I have nothing to say about the second part of your question.





Raad:

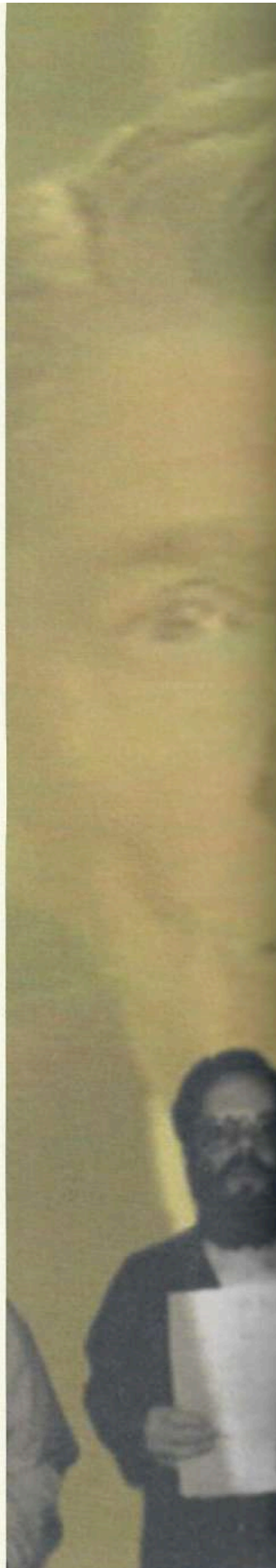
OK, then, let me then continue with a general question about the political scandal that is most closely associated in the US with the captivity of the Americans in Lebanon in the 1980's, the Iran-Contra affair. What is your understanding of the affair?

Bachar:

It is clear to me that no event framed more publicly the abduction of westerners in Lebanon than the American scandal widely known as the Iran-Contra affair. In the United States, the mention of Iran-Contra conjures up for most people memories of the publicly televised congressional hearings on the affair that were held in 1987. Iran-Contra's most immediate association today is with that of the heretofore unknown and by now quite famous former Marine Lieutenant Colonel, Oliver North. As was eventually revealed, North was far from being the "defiant patriot", "the man from the White House believed to have masterminded one of the most audacious covert operations in American history", as North's biographer wrote and as was widely reported in the popular press. While North's televised testimony before Congress in July 1987 had catapulted him to the forefront of the scandal and made of him "a haircut, a logo for T-shirts, a doll, a cocktail, and a hero sandwich", he was actually one of three main managers, or "action officers" as a journalist described North, Robert (Bud) McFarlane and John Poindexter. I should also mention that the scandal was by no means a primarily American matter. It involved among others the governments of the United States, Iran, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Saudi-Arabia, Israel, Kuwait, South Korea, South Africa, Taiwan, Brunei, and Lebanon, and nationals from the public and private sectors of every one of these countries.

I read that at the opening of the televised public hearings into the Iran-Contra affair in May 1987, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) described the scandal as follows: "The story is both sad and sordid; it is filled with inconsistencies and often-unexplainable conduct. None of the participants emerges unblemished. People of great character and ability holding positions of trust and authority in our governments were drawn into a web of deception and despair."

I would like to add that deception and despair also characterized the investigations that were intended to explain publicly what the scandal was about. Instead of offering a



thorough inquiry into the events of the past two years, the hearings and the investigations became an occasion to produce "heroes, villains, adventurers, and fall guys", none more heroic and villainous than North. And the events of the preceding two years were truly remarkable; they shed light on the conduct of a number of state representatives, on the operations of several governmental agencies, and on the conceptualizing and implementation of national and international policies.

Reading through the tomes of institutional investigations, journalistic analyses and personal reflections can confuse and dazzle any reader. This material presents detailed though tedious stories of "lives and lies", covert operations, shrewd policy maneuvering, as well as absurd episodes from all around the globe. Still, there is a story that emerges.

The Iran-Contra scandal was produced by the public disclosure of three separate events. The first was the downing by Sandinista soldiers of a small plane over southern Nicaragua on 5 October 1986. The sole survivor of this incident, Eugene Hasenfus, subsequently revealed under interrogation that the cargo of arms on his plane was part of a Contra resupply effort that was sanctioned by the CIA.

The second event was the publication a month later, on 3 November 1986, in the Lebanese magazine *Al-Shiraa*, of a story about former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane's trip to Teheran in May 1986. The article also reported that the United States had sold arms to Iran.

The third event was the discovery in November 1986 by aides to the Attorney General of a revealing memo in the offices of North. The memo detailed a planned diversion of funds from the arms sales to Iran to the Contra operations in Nicaragua.

Thus Iran-Contra involved two distinct Reagan Administration policies. The first policy concerned the trading of US arms to Iran for, among other things, the release of US and other western hostages held in Lebanon by Iran's proxy militias in Beirut. The sales did in fact lead to the release of American hostages Benjamin Weir in 1985 and Martin Jenco and David Jacobsen in 1986. It is important to note that this initiative contradicted the publicly stated US policy "never to negotiate with states that sponsor terrorism"; Iran had been officially designated a sponsor of terrorism in January 1984.






The second policy involved the support of Contra military and paramilitary activities in Nicaragua between 1984 and 1986. The legality of this policy was also challenged in Congress and the press particularly in relation to the provisions of the First and Second Boland Amendments of 1982 and 1984. No links had been established between the Iranian and Nicaraguan initiatives until the discovery of the so-called diversion memo on 22 November 1986 by aides to Attorney General Meese. The memo detailed plans to divert around \$12 million from the arms sales to Iran to the Contras.

This development led the White House to fire North and to provoke the resignation of National Security Advisor Poindexter.

Meese's *Fact Finding Inquiry*, conducted between 21 and 24 November 1986, was the first "official" attempt to construct the narrative of Iran-Contra. It was followed by four other official investigations, The Senate Intelligence Committee's *Preliminary Inquiry into the Sale of Arms to Iran and Possible Diversion of Funds to the Nicaragua Resistance* (issued 19 January 1987); the Tower Commission's *The Tower Commission Report* (issued 26 February 1987); the joint Senate and House Select Committees' *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views* (issued 18 November 1987); and the Independent Counsel's *Iran-Contra: The Final Report* (issued 4 August 1993).

My reading of these documents demonstrated to me that the inquiries' and reports' investigative scope was limited to particular areas and questions and as such failed to address a number of central questions about the development and implementation of US foreign policy. I am convinced that a bringing together of the facts was far from the sole or even the primary motive of these investigations. Politicized and partial, these investigations produced contested narratives that displaced interest from the historical and political dimension of the affair to a concentrated analysis of the good health of the American political system and to the following four particular areas of interest: 1) the chronology of the events that constituted the affair; 2) the changes that ought to be instituted to avoid similar abuses in future policy making and administration; 3) the legality of the arms sale to Iran and of the diversion



scheme; 4) the level of participation of Reagan Administration officials in the various initiatives. These areas of interest were given expression in the following questions that dominated US public discussions of the affair: Was there an arms for hostages deal and did western powers negotiate with "terrorists"? Was Reagan aware of the diversion of funds to the Contras from the arms sales to Iran? What officials in the Reagan Administration were complicit in the cover-up of the story? I also want to point out that while these questions became a vehicle through which faith in the good health of the system was restored they failed to account for the historical and political significance of the abduction of western men in Lebanon. How was it, I want to ask that 5 investigations failed to ask the most pertinent questions in this affair: why were the westerners in Lebanon abducted? What were the historical and political motives behind these abductions?

Raad:

I get the sense from one segment in your tape, the one where you discuss how each American hostage begins his story by talking about the weather, that you are making a point about how the Americans were de-politicizing their abduction in their books, that they were treating their kidnappings in personal rather than political terms. Is this right?

Bachar:

Yes, that's correct.

It is important to remember that the representation of the experience of captivity is by no means foreign to American readers. In fact, captivity narratives are "the only literary-mythological form indigenous to N. America." From Indian captivity narratives such as Mary Rowlandson's to autobiographical accounts of Vietnam captivity such as Gerald Coffee's, the stories of a horrific detention at the hands of some enemy have been written and published widely in the United States. These published narratives, which recount the stories of men and women who were detained at different historical junctures in different regions of the world and for different reasons, are certainly more than a repetition of the same story of captivity set in a different place and at a different time. Still, particular themes and narrative structures have consistently shaped these narratives – themes and structures that have varied cultural, political, philosophical, and literary meanings.




My hypothesis then is that the captivity of the Americans in Lebanon was always a story to be told, written, and filmed, and inevitably has been told, written, and filmed. Anderson, and Sutherland knew this when they discussed whether "we would each write a book, should we ever be released". We should also keep in mind that seven books by ex-hostages have already been published in the United States where *Den of Lions*, *Taken on Trust*, and *An Evil Cradling* have, over the past few years, become the privileged representatives of this evolved genre of captivity memoirs. Although the books' sales figures did not meet publishers' expectations, they were far from disappointing, with orders of 170,000 copies for Anderson's book even before it hit American bookstores. In England, *Den of Lions*, *Some Other Rainbow*, *Taken on Trust*, and *An Evil Cradling* have all been listed on national bestseller lists, with Brian Keenan's account topping *The Sunday Times* of London's bestseller list for nine weeks in 1992.

This proliferation of captivity accounts that detail the experiences of men who had spent most of their captivity in the same place, around the same time, and under very similar conditions is intriguing. Commenting on this matter, Keenan remarked that this multiplicity of books proves that "each man experienced his imprisonment in his own way". This remark highlights a particularly familiar tendency in the captivity memoirs whereby the experience of captivity is represented primarily as a psychological and individual rather than a social or political phenomenon. This move away from the socio-political is effected at the beginning of each of the narratives. The formula is familiar with each book beginning with a man in a happy condition of innocence or complacency. By divine intervention, this happiness is disrupted; man is alienated from his happy state and plunged into a trial and ordeal in which his soul is in peril. The incident of captivity figures as a complete accident, a misfortune. In the books by the Americans, almost all begin similarly by describing the moment or day of abduction. Jacobsen, Weir, Ciccipio, Waite, and Anderson respectively begin their accounts with the following passages:

"May 28, 1985 was a typical Beirut morning, swiftly brightening as the sun burned off the early morning mist."

"The morning of May 8, 1984, blended beauty with harshness. On that bright spring day in the Muslim section of the city,





the sounds of birds coming from the untended garden plot next to our apartment building contrasted with the angry growl of distant explosions."

"I don't think there was a happier man in the world than I was on the morning of September 12, 1986."

"Beirut, February 20, 1987

When I awoke, it was dusk. For a moment I lay still slowly, reluctantly returning to the conscious world. It was unusually quiet. A gentle breeze stirred the faded hotel curtains, bringing with it a hint of sea."

The emphasis in these beginnings on detailing the meteorological conditions in the city or the psychological state of mind of the hostage-to-be comes at the expense of some clarification of the socio-political context of Lebanon. By bracketing the very day, the very moment of their abduction from the socio-political context, the incident of captivity figures here too as an accident. The shift is from the social and political toward the personal and psychological aspects of detention.

Raad:

The hostages never write of a political dimension to their abduction?

Bachar:

From the books and from my discussions with them in captivity, it is clear to me that the hostages were all to some extent aware that their abduction was a political rather than a criminal or personal matter. Most of them write in their books of four factors that they believed contributed to their detention: 2) The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon; 1) The Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon along with Israel's detention of hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinian men and women in detention centers there; 3) The December 1983 bombings of US, French, and other Kuwaiti facilities in Kuwait by an Iranian allied group, and the subsequent arrest and imprisonment of some members of this group who became known as the Dawa Seventeen; and 4) The 1986 US bombing of Libya.

This political and historical dimension was also acknowledged by the families of the hostages who were dealing with the White House and the State Department during the detention of their loved ones. Carol Weir (Benjamin Weir's wife) has written about her meeting with then Secretary of State





George Shultz. In the meeting, whose goal was to convince the Reagan administration to negotiate with the captors, Carol Weir had argued that "it should be recognized that they (the Shi'ites of Lebanon) had some legitimate grievances against the United States". The grievances that Weir mentioned were primarily to "our [US] lack of concern for justice in the area". She wrote of the oppressive US-supported Israeli aggressions in South Lebanon as emblematic of this injustice: "Americans didn't seem to understand why there is so much rage against us in the countries of the Middle East... The United States had supplied the Israelis with cluster bombs, vacuum bombs, and weapons of every kind. American bombs by air and American shells by sea were raining on the city of Beirut. The civilian population was on the verge of panic".

Unfortunately, Secretary of State Shultz was more intent on dismissing and discrediting the captors than on engaging in any kind of dialogue with them as was evident from his response to Carol Weir that "the Shi'ites... are pagan and primitive people", and that "such people were crazy, they heard voices from God, they were deranged. It was impossible to talk to them". One understands better how such disturbingly racist proclamations could be stated in public by the US Secretary of State if one keeps in mind the fact that such declarations were consistent with many of the characterizations of the captors presented by the press and subsequently reaffirmed by the hostages. In other words, even as the hostages would present various political motives to explain their abductions, at the same time they drowned these political explanations in a barrage of terms that demonized and belittled the hostage takers and their motives. A discussion of this last point, of the hostages' representations of their captors will have to wait for another time and please do not ask me of whether the captors, be they Hezbollah or anyone else was "a mark of shame upon the Lebanese Shi'ite community they purported to represent". On this matter, I proceed with the understanding that the captors and their actions were at times despised and at times held in high esteem for various reasons by Lebanese and westerners alike.

Raad:

Can you tell us something about your insistence on having your voice dubbed by a female voice-over?

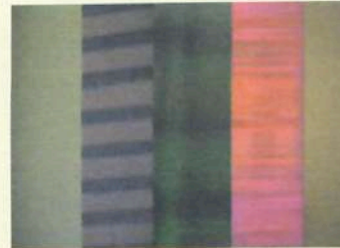
Bachar:

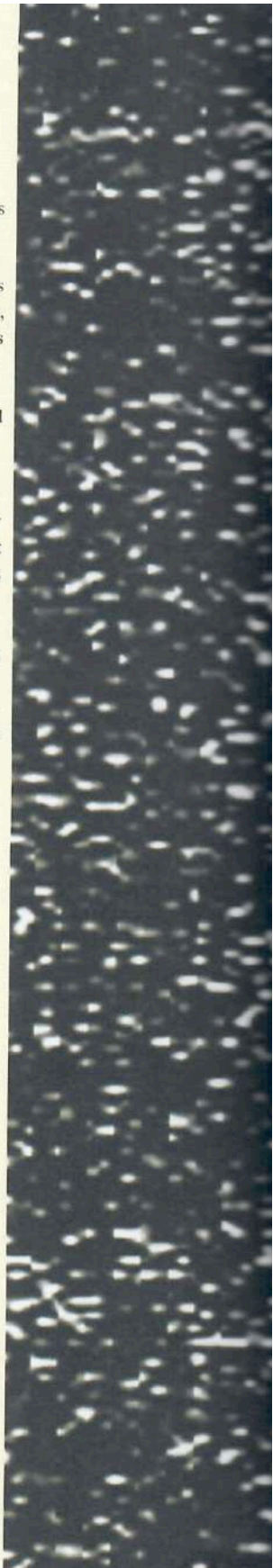
Yes. A unanimous conclusion drawn by the hostages about captivity is that the period of detention in Lebanon has radically altered their understanding of the world. They all seem to come out of their horrible ordeal with a new and gratifying way to relate to family, friends, State, and God. But the most significant and productive aspect of detention is that the westerners come out of it with a clearer and better sense of self. The matter of a female voice-over is for me central to the question of the particular kind of self that emerges from captivity.

A fascinating and revealing aspect of books written by the Americans is that of the literary contributions of the hostages' girlfriends and wives. Anderson's, Sutherland's, and Weir's books, for example, include sections in which Madeleine Anderson, Jean Sutherland and Carol Weir contribute by relating "their" side of the story. In many reviews of the books in the US popular press, I was surprised that critics have characterized the contributions of the wives as "odd" and as "distracting". The question I want to ask these critics is: From what does Madeleine's or Carol's account divert us to deserve this characterization as a "distraction"?

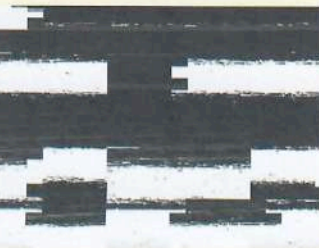
It is evident when reading the captivity memoirs that what was unfolding in Beirut was a series of events from which the wives were excluded. Beirut's cells, in other words, were spaces populated mainly by men, by Arab and western men. So, one can say that the wives' contributions constitute a gendered distraction in that they impose onto an otherwise male narrative of captivity a woman's thoughts and perspective.

However, it is noteworthy that Madeleine's account was not the only one written by a woman close to Terry Anderson. Terry's sister, Peggy Say, had for years been vocal in the popular press about her brother's fate. Her book titled *Forgotten*, which detailed her efforts to secure through meetings with domestic and foreign governments and officials her brother's release, was published during her brother's absence in 1987. By 1993 when Terry Anderson's book was published, Peggy Say's book was out of print and she was out of sight.





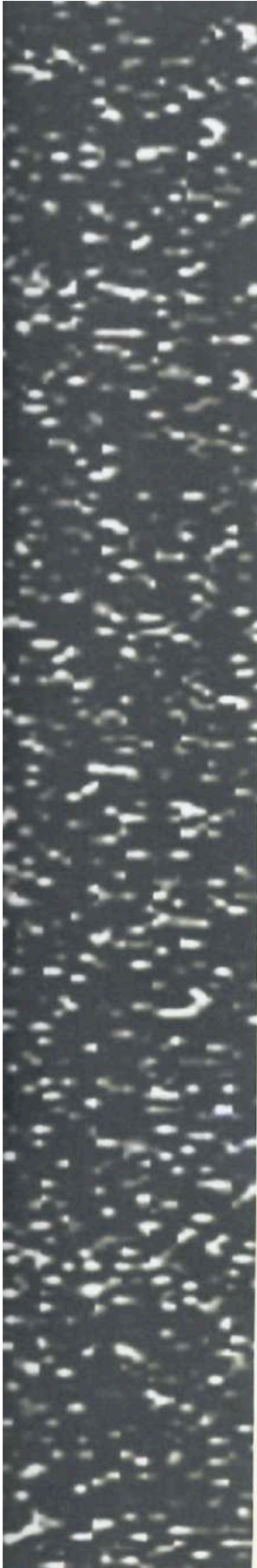
What I want to argue is that while the captivity of westerners in Lebanon affected not only the hostages but also their families, friends, governments, and numerous others, it is intriguing that the story of captivity is distilled in the memoirs to being not that of the western men and their mothers, fathers, brothers, friends, or sisters, but particularly that of the hostages and their wives/girlfriends. The distillation of the narrative in its published form suggests that Madeleine and the wives/girlfriends' contributions constitute not only gendered contributions but more.



While the published narratives posit the hostage's relations with his wife/girlfriend at the center of the story of captivity and post-captivity, the books begin by relating a very different pre-captivity rapport between the hostages and their partners at the time. For the majority of the western hostages, Lebanon was not only a place of intrigue and violence but also a place that offered them an alternative to a grueling life in the west. Many former hostages describe their lives in the west as unsatisfactory, professionally and personally. One hostage writes that his two marriages had failed because of his workaholicism and that it was these difficulties that had driven him to Lebanon. He writes, "I went through two difficult marriages, both to women I admire. I confess that my workaholicism was the major reason for the difficulties. Now, in captivity, I was able to dwell on repairing the mistakes that had, in many ways, driven me to the Middle East."

David Jacobsen speaks of his "escape from the United States" as a consequence of the court proceedings that followed his break-up with his wife. He writes, "Following a bitter and emotionally upsetting divorce that left me with considerable anger against the family court system, I fled the United States..." And for Brian Keenan, his choice to leave his country had to do with his desires to recharge himself with new ideas, thoughts, relationships, and feelings. He writes of his fears and anxieties about aging and of "never going anywhere". It is subsequently made clear that Keenan's fears and anxieties are also and mainly about his inability to be like his colleagues and friends, to take up "the challenge that life presents", of "love, domesticity, marriage".

This theme of disrupted, strained and unrealized marriages as a motive behind the westerners' desires to go to the Middle East sets up another crucial distinction between the west



and the Middle East. In this distinction, the west stands as the locale of failed masculine relations to heterosexual domesticity, and Lebanon figures as the place that can and did rehabilitate the westerners so that they emerged from their captivity as the good husbands they ought to be. The books also contain lengthy formulations by the hostages as to the sexuality of the captors, and about the various relations amongst the western men and between the western men and their Lebanese captors. These interactions are sexualized along the divide of power that separates the guards from the hostages. Some writers have already suggested that the drama of western women's captivity tends to revolve around their sexual assault. I want to suggest that of western men's revolves around containing the threat of sexual desire for men, for Arab and western men. The threat of this desire for Arab men, emerges in the Lebanon captivity memoirs through the imagined scenarios of rape. The threat of the desire for other western men is given expression in the loving and contentious relations among the westerners as it is recounted at length in the books. This threat is ultimately contained through the literary contributions of the wives/girlfriends. Madeleine's, Sis', Carol's, Jill's, and Elham's contributions not only confirm the women's self-imposed celibacy during their husbands' ordeal. Their contributions also confirm that the homoerotic threat expressed by the hostages is contained, and that women remain the westerners' love objects. Moreover, in the captivity narratives, the threat of male-male desire seems to be essential for the rehabilitation of the westerners. I have spoken earlier about how the hostages begin their narratives by describing their failed masculine relations to heterosexual domesticity. Thus when one hostage writes that fate had somehow brought him to Lebanon in order to come to terms with his inability to live in intimate association with someone, he means this literally. By intimate association is meant the range of relation between men that span the homosocial and the homosexual, the loving and threatening. As such, these relations figure in the captivity books in a teleology that begins with the westerners' "inability to live in intimate association" with someone, proceeds to their forced homosocial intimate association with westerners and their fears of being raped by Arab guards whose sexuality is uncertain and ends with their reunification with their wives/girlfriends with whom the episode of captivity is narrated. This progression confirms that the insights of western male hostages have primarily epistemological value. The books demonstrate that the



experience of captivity and its representation grant the male hostage a better understanding of "the enemy, God, the family, or self", but also of their sexuality. It confirms their heterosexuality.

Raad:

I get the impression that you are making fun of the western hostages? Some may wonder whether you are ridiculing them. What happened to all these men, be they American, British, or Arab was horrible and tragic? Don't you agree?

Bachar:

Yes, I agree.

The books written by the Americans relate a remarkably sordid account, and stand as a fascinating testimony to our horrible ordeal in Lebanon during those years. Abducted and confined in detention centers, "dungeons", cells, and prisons, we all endured situations of extreme physical and psychological abuse. Beaten and blindfolded, gagged and taped, harangued, threatened, tortured, isolated, abandoned, half-starved, chained, ridiculed and harassed, we suffered greatly at the hands of our captors. And some of us continue to suffer the physical and psychological effects of our detention.

blue just like the Mediterranean.

My interest today is in how this kind of experience can be documented and represented. I am also convinced that the Americans have failed miserably in this regard but that in their failure they have revealed much to us about the possibilities and limits of representing the experience of captivity. What I want to ask is: of all the ways the stories of captivity could have been written, why were they written this way?

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