

This is Lebanon ...A Loaded Phrase

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When I explain that I've had eighteen continuous years of residence in Lebanon; eighteen years as a professor at the Lebanese National Conservatory of Music; eighteen years of marriage to a Lebanese woman; eighteen years of demeaning and costly work permit/ residence permit renewals; eighteen years of living with no social safety net, no social security, no protection under the law, and no retirement benefits; the hair-trigger response is always the same: "This is Lebanon". This very loaded phrase is the ultimate deal-breaker. It implies apathy, frustration, a painful past and hopelessness. For a foreigner like me it represents an impasse, a 'catch 22'.

The weight of the 1925 Citizenship Law has affected me and my family in many ways; ways that are subtle and profound. The devastating domino effect of the archaic 1925 Citizenship Law can be validated in the lives of thousands of husbands, children, and grandchildren who live here, work here, and contribute, in many fantastic and immeasurable ways, to Lebanon and Lebanese society... Here's my story: Most of my students were born years after my arrival here. I am a civil servant. My wife is a civil servant. My daughter was born at the American University Hospital in Beirut. As a professor of music I hold the highest classification, reflective of my sixteen years of study. I pay taxes, insurance payments, water payments, electricity payments, tuition fees, house payments, car payments, and have done so for eighteen years. As civil servants, our combined salaries do not cover all of these costs and, to add insult to injury, I've been required to pay nearly \$40,000 in residency fees (\$2,000 each year x 18). Add this to health insurance and a very long list of exclusions such as public education and tax returns for families with children... It's scary.

Now, as possibly the first American male to take up residence after the civil war in Lebanon, my first

years here were humbling. I was a guest and acted as such for many years... "Lebanon took me under its wing and treated me like a king" I often recount. Moving to another country is like being born again and frankly, for those first ten years I felt like a child. However, I am now 45 years old and as a provider, a father, and a husband I can no longer ignore the fact that I own nothing. My wife and I can no longer accept that our family has no social safety net, no protection under the law, no social security, and a very, very uncertain future with no retirement benefits. We desperately want our daughter to feel, and be seen as 100 percent Lebanese!

One cannot mention the citizenship law without using words like assimilation and identity. I often give the example of a Lebanese living in Germany who never learns to speak fluent German knowing that he/she will never be identified as a full citizen. This unfortunate inability to assimilate leads to an immeasurable loss of opportunity. For my daughter, like all of the other children born in Lebanon and denied their Lebanese nationality, there is an even more fundamental crisis of identity. At the age of nine how will she begin to answer the simplest but most important question of all: 'Who am I? Is she Lebanese or American? Is her mother tongue French, English, or Arabic? Is she Christian or Muslim? Is she culturally an Arab or Westerner? Where does she fit in?'

The nationality question has served to censure the constitution, equality, and the rule of law! We all hold out hope that the thousands of husbands, children, and grandchildren who live, work, contribute, and will eventually die here will be granted a right which is, was, and will always be inherently theirs!

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