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## U.S. academics come to grips with Lebanon's distinct diversity

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By James Fitz-Morris  
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BEIRUT: Lebanon became a classroom for a group of American academics over the last two weeks. Students and professors from the Boston Theological Institute came here to meet with a wide variety of religious and political leaders to better understand how national unity develops out of religious and cultural diversity.

What they got was a front-row view of a country at an historic crossroads.

Their "guest lecturers" included PSP leader Walid Jumblatt and Maronite Patriarch Butros Sfeir, both of whom, the group says, spoke of not only the challenges of leading at this time but also of the great hope they have for Lebanon's future, especially now during the elections - the first ones in nearly 30 years not conducted under the supervision of Syria.

While it was the first trip to Lebanon for most, a few, such as Father Raymond Helmick, have been here before.

The author and Boston college professor was here between 1982 and 1984 and wrote a number of reports on the Civil War. He is encouraged now by what he sees.

"There has been a lot of recovery. I was very surprised, as a matter of fact, to see the Syrians go. I never thought it would happen without a settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli question," he said.

He notes the dedication and hard work protesters put in this past spring to force change in a country where change often comes slowly.

Nearly all members of the group, though, were struck by what they saw as a reluctance among Lebanese to talk about what really happened during the civil war, and worry about what that could mean for the future.

The visitors expressed a wish that groups in the country could "own-up" to the harm they did to others and talk about it and forgive the harm done to them.

Some believe Lebanon needs something similar to the "Truth and Reconciliation" committees used in South Africa to help heal the wounds left from the apartheid era.

Others, such as Susan Feurzeig, pursuing a master of divinity degree, compare it to their own experience at home.

She said: "[Americans] never really finished working through [the war in Vietnam] and now we have moved into another war that drags on and on, in Iraq. People need to remember that the next generations haven't really felt the pain of war, so they aren't going to understand as much as this generation how important it [is to] keep the peace."

Rodney Peterson, executive director of the Boston Theological Institute, added: "If there's not a readiness to recognize that things have been done to really harm people and harmed the society,

it's really hard to move forward."

For the group, this is the main point of the trip: learning how Lebanon, with all of its various communities, manages to move forward as a country.

Trelawney Grenfell, a doctoral student in religion and international relations, said being here opened her eyes to the differences between here and the U.S.: "It's been very helpful to just listen to everything and say, 'OK what's working here?' Not to just try to take our ideas and proposals and transplant them."

She noted the difficult balancing act leaders sometimes have to perform, in Lebanon and throughout the world. "I think it must be really challenging to have a difference between what logically makes sense for the good of the country and what you know your constituency is looking for from you."

Tom Porter, a lawyer and the executive director of the JUSTPEACE Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, is optimistic about Lebanon's future. "If it can't happen here, I'm not sure it can happen in the world. This country is a model of the attempt [to seek peace between religious communities]."

Grenfell said: "It's like a battered woman who stands up straight and tall and looks in the mirror and says, 'No, I am beautiful. I am going to heal and I am going to move forward.' There is tension and self-interest and selfishness here but at the same time there is this strong determination to love this country, to heal it, to move it forward. "It's a love and a beauty in the face of suffering; it's very inspiring."

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