

MARS Module 10 - Fieldwork Report Assignment

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In April 2017 I went with a small team to Lebanon, along with fellow colleagues from MARS, Henry, Joan-Manuel, Clare, Alberto and Dario - with a view to working (using psychosocial music interventions and musical tuition) with Palestinian and Syrian children at the refugee camps and shelters. Here are some personal reflections on the visit, that is as much about my experience of the country, its people and culture, as the actual work I did while there. I also include incidents from the trip, not just those relating to the work mainly because most of the stories and impressions (and learning) I returned home with, significantly related to my experience of the country's cultural, religious and historical richness and complexities.

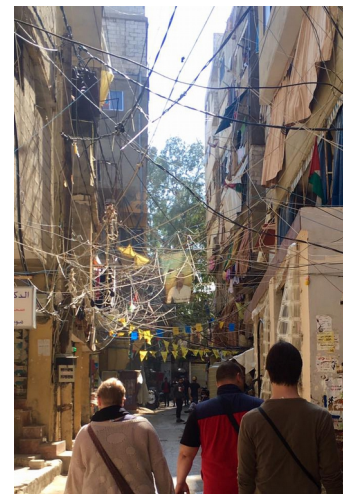
Before arriving in Lebanon, I had considered how it would appear be with around 1.5 million of its 4 million population now there living as refugees from neighbouring countries. It is a country that struggles with that ratio in many ways. The image of enormous camps (perhaps similar to the ones I had seen at Calais and Dunkirk in France in 2016) was not what I was met with. In reality many of the 'camps' are more areas of the cities, a part of the city but self reliant, with their own organisation and security. People in the camps, many who have been there all their lives, are denied citizenship and freedom to travel, have poor human rights and no state healthcare. The infrastructure is fragile and often appears dangerous – no more apparent than in the domestic electrical systems:



Beddawi camp, Tripoli



In the building where we stayed



Shatila camp, Beriut

Most Lebanese, as good humoured as they are, in the main don't show a great deal of concern for the plight of the refugees - or rather, for the size of the problem, it often seems to be hidden from their view. Indeed it is a country of contrast and contradiction. Something that, in many ways, is also reflected in it's geography, a land of diversity and difference – and as locals are proud to say, 'a place where you can ski in the mountains in the morning, swim in the sea in the afternoon'. There are also extremes between wealth and poverty, freedom and restriction, the modern and the old, outstanding beauty and stark urbanism (and the pollution that goes with it). The religious mix and divide was also a surprise – 54% Muslim, 40% Christian.



My overall impression was that it is both a open and hospitable country, and somewhat on-edge. I suppose its history must that makes it so. There are checkpoints throughout the country, armed soldiers and barbed wire on city streets, checks for car bombs at shopping malls with mirrors on sticks. That state of both being 'normal' and somewhat 'on-alert' seems to feed into the national temperament- displayed for example in the erratic driving and, in what appears, a general disregard for safety. It is also interesting that there are more concerns for personal issues, like for body image (with many billboards advertising gyms and cosmetic surgery), rather than wider issues like environmentalism. Very little waste, it seems, is recycled and plastic lines most of the coast. "Oh we do recycle, joked a worker at the NGO in Saida, we make geographical structures with all our rubbish!". Perhaps they just have more pressing issues to worry about.

Lebanon, at times, feels like an assault on the senses; the sights, smells and sounds; all intense in their own way. It was certainly an interesting to be in place doing music based work when the ambient sounds particularly are so resonating and confronting – the traffic, clashing 'bandari' music, calls to prayer, football matches on TV and general hubbub all feeding into the experience. Here are a two such examples:

The distinctive sounds of Lebanon - a bus ride in Beirut and trying to sleep at 4am with the (somewhat surreal) call(s) to prayer (and barking dogs!)

Assumoud children's centre

We started work at the Assumoud children's centre in Beddawi camp, on the edge of Tripoli in the north of Lebanon.



The children, from the neighbouring Palestinian camp, ranged in musical ability on their chosen instruments, but mostly beginners. My role in the school was largely around supporting MARS tutor Henry in the formation of an orchestra and the learning of materials with a view to make a public performance later in the year. I had the opportunity to lead some 'warm-up' sessions, presenting simple songs for the younger group to learn and sing; African melodies, playful 'rounds' and 3 parts tunes. I also ran guitar tuition sessions with a smaller group. In the larger group sessions it was good to watch how Henry engaged and motivated the children, and even though my role sometimes felt superfluous (I'm sure my own lack of technical musical knowledge hindered my participation in some ways). However, I enjoyed meeting and supporting the children. They were attentive and eager to learn, and engaged with a humour and openness.

Indeed everyone we met at the Beddawi camp was warm and welcoming, especially once they knew why we were there. There is an understandable suspicion of strangers too. Another camp at Saida, in the south, which we were intending to also visit, had been infiltrated with 'extremists' and a fierce conflict had started up since we arrived in Lebanon with the loss of many lives.

We were generally escorted around the Beddawi camp by our hosts from the school. On one evening, however, when three of us walked unescorted around the camp, a man in dressed in army camouflage approached us and asked us to follow him. He looked serious, and didn't return our smiles. As we were led up a side street I started to feel worried. He beckons us to a group of men who also held serious expressions as they questioned us. When we eventually mentioned the names of our hosts (Dalal and Abo Atef) they softened and smiled, patting us on the back as if to say, Well why didn't you say?!

It was at times like this that highlighted the sense of protection that is needed due the instabilities and threats that have existed for a long time. It appears that trouble is never far away wherever you are in Lebanon. As we sat having tea with Dalal's family, we heard news of the latest US bombing of the Syrian airport near Damascus, only an hour down the road by car.

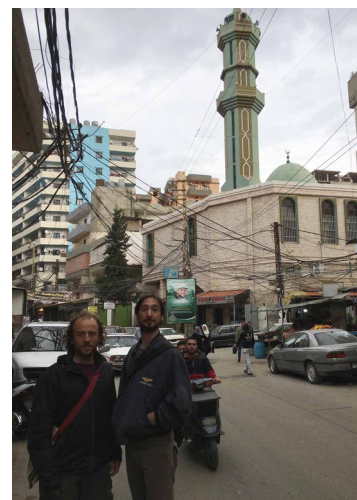
This fragility of security was also highlighted one evening when Abo Atef took us to eat at a restaurant close to the camp (5 Stars!). The food was very good, and I was surprised there were so many empty tables. I asked Abo Atef why it was so quiet. "Oh people don't come here so much since the shooting", he said casually. It seems that gunmen had entered one evening a few months before shooting indiscriminately.



Abo Atef's mother's tobacco shop



5 Stars Restaurant



Our 'unescorted' walk

Blue Mission (NGO) Saida

Due to the violent situation inside the Palestinian camp at Saida, we were unable to go work there, so a visit was organised for myself and MARS colleagues Alberto and Dario to go instead to a local NGO in Saida that work with some of the Syrian children in the refugee shelters (temporary accommodation) in the city, Blue Mission.

As we arrived in Saida, we saw images of the camp (again a part of the city) on a television in a coffee bar with sounds of gunfire and smoke rising from the buildings. We were told that at least 50 bodies had been taken out of the camp. This is where the position of the Lebanese authorities seems conflicting. Their forces surrounded the camp, waiting for the situation to be resolved. We were told that if there was no resolution within a few days, or if any of the violence came outside of the camp, then the Lebanese would, if necessary, go in and stop the fighting with force. That would, of course, result in casualties from either sides fighting and possibly civilians as well.

The NGO workers from Blue Mission were mostly Lebanese young adults from the city. They were running music and games sessions with Syrian children in a few shelters that were set up in disused buildings. On our visits, groups were mostly held in the living space of the families or outside in the yard of the property. The children were generally younger than those we had been working with at Beddawi,

some 4 or 5 years old, and the older ones 9 or 10 years. It was apparent from the start that they were more reserved in their general demeanour. I assumed they carried more trauma, which, given the recent dislocation they had faced, was not surprising. The parents also seemed uncertain with our presence, and acted more distant towards us. The children, however, clearly had a good relationship with many of the Blue Mission workers. Most notable were the sessions led by a young Palestinian man, Ahmed, who was impressive in his engagement (expressive and open gestures) and in his creativity in leading the children of all ages. I felt I was learning much from his approach and the movement and sound led activities he brought.

Blue Mission also invited us to lead some sessions. This was challenging since we couldn't directly communicate with the children in the same way. I led with mostly copying exercises and songs, using gestures, movements, sounds, percussion, call and response. I noticed in the clapping exercise and copying rhythms how many children found it difficult to stay in time or copy a pattern. I reflected on the video extract shown to us at the beginning of the MARS course, of Palestinian children clapping out of time (a display of trauma, it was suggested). Perhaps the copying games were most easy for them to participate in. On an occasion where I passed around a tambourine, I invited them to copy the pattern of the previous person, which they did well, and make up a new one to pass on to the next person, which they struggled with. Each session would generally start with a name game, creating rhythmic patterns with names, for example: Yana, Yana, Yana... Yana, Yana, Mustafa... Mustafa, Mustafa, Mustafa... Mustafa, Mustafa, Zain... Zain, Zain, Zain.... etc. This appeared to be very affirming and fun for the children.



Perhaps, on reflection, I overdid the copying exercises. Even though they could help the whole group to participate, I later wondered if the children needed more space for self expression. Had my time there been longer I would have liked to explore this. As it was though, it felt that a good relationship was built with the children in a very short time.

Another thing that struck me while visiting the family here was becoming aware of the privilege that gives me the opportunity to be there doing this work and meeting those people, and it did, at times, feel like a form of 'tourism'. I questioned what good I was actually doing there and I questioned also how they saw me, this slightly exotic stranger on a flying visit. One day two boys came up to me after the group, shouting 'Barcelona! Barcelona!' – they thought I was a famous footballer!

I also had a moment of shame in one of the shelters one day, being part of, what later felt like, a self-congratulating photo session with volunteers from the NGO taking 'selfies' with the children, and I caught the eye of one of the parents, who gave me blank look as I smiled at him. He probably wondered what my motivation was as well.



After visiting the shelters, Alberto and I spend a day running a workshop in ‘groupwork and music interventions’ with the workers from Blue Mission. I tried to frame the session also as an exchange of ideas, as it was clear we could also learn much from them. We made games, body percussion, voice warm ups and improvisation , and learnt some songs; all activities, of course, they could also use in their sessions with the children.

It was rewarding and fun to plan and run this session with Alberto from MARS. It came with challenges too, as both of us appear to enjoy a level of autonomy in our facilitation. Therefore we had to comprise aspects of our own presentation. I really enjoyed working alongside him, especially for the inspiration I got from his level of creative risk taking and expressiveness.

As a funny and rather embarrassing anecdote, and an interesting reflection on language awareness: During the training, I introduced the warm up game ‘Zip Zap Boing’. I wondered why one of the men in the group looked shocked when I started the game by turning to him repeatedly pointing and shouting ‘Zip’ (hoping he would continue the ‘zip’ around the circle). The rest of the group seemed surprised as well and some started laughing. I asked what the problem was, and he explained that ‘zip’ in Arabic is slang for penis!

I quickly changed the game to ‘Zap Boing Woosh’ !



With Blue Mission (NGO) staff and volunteers

The rest of the training went more smoothly. We ended with a discussion about the problems of the region and the needs of the young people, both refugees and Lebanese. The Blue Mission workers recognise that the involvement of the ‘rich (Christian) West’ has surely aggravated many of the problems of segregation and conflict of the region, but they also some see the need to address the many issues that come from within the local cultural/ religious traditions. As an example they suggested more work needed to be done with the parents of some children, particularly from more rural areas, like many in the Syrian shelters, where the young boys are still beaten and not allowed to cry in an attempt to make them stronger. Here, surely, lies an underlying contribution to male suppression and aggression, and the kind of violent conflict that results from it .

Beirut and The Return

Beirut is like many big cities. The memory and image of a city caught in conflict is now receding, and now only a few buildings show the scars of the civil war from 20 years ago. What struck me as the most apparent, and shocking, thing on display is the disparity between the privileged and most marginalised. People living in the one area, the Shatila camp, where people live in cramped conditions with fragile basic amenities, and (again) very restricted human rights, while across town young men race their Porches through the streets of the wealthy neighbourhood. It is, of course, something that is also seen in many other cities throughout the world, but it is still surprising how little visibility and awareness there is of the refugees that make up almost a half of all the country's population. They are often only evident as people, young and old, begging on the street. Some of the children I saw asking for money, and like most other pedestrians, that I did my best to avoid, reminded me of the Syrian children I had met in the shelters. Another uneasy realisation.

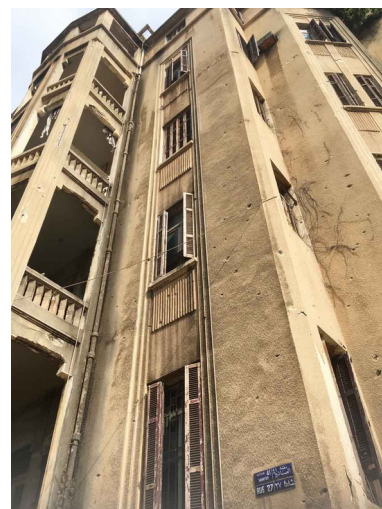
I spent the last few days of my trip staying in Beirut. I have to say much of my time there I felt somewhat uneasy; perhaps the presence of army personal (and the tank at the end of the road where I was staying) added to this. I also came close a couple of times to be hit by a speeding moped; three-up on a moped hurtling down the wrong side of a city street after dark, no lights or helmets, appears to be quite normal! The streets are often full of acrid car fumes and incessant honking of horns; many, it seemed, honking at me assuming that I must only be walking in the street to hail a taxi!



The Army on the streets.



Body image poster



Evidence of the civil war (1975-1990)

I had time in those last few days to reflect on the journey as a whole. The mixed feelings I had for the country was, I'm sure, also reflected in some sense of questioning for being there. It still, however, felt like an invaluable experience and taught me much about the many different people and their socio-political environment. I feel there was also much gained in the exchanges I had with the many people that I met. It is good to have a truer picture of the situation that so many marginalised people of this region are faced with, and the many struggles they have been dealing with for decades. It appears the situation is not getting better for many; a view that is often distorted, misunderstood or ignored. It was also good to feel that I made some new friends, to hear their stories, to share music and food, and probably most importantly, to feel as equals with.

The psychosocial musical interventions that I was part of, however short, felt like they were well received and had a positive impact that could have a lasting effect, not only for the children in the youth centre and the shelters, but also for the staff and volunteers. The MARS team presence there, I'm sure, also acts as emotional support for the communities there, to give hope to their situation and so build resilience. Maybe we needed more time to really know the effectiveness of the interventions we made during this trip. On a personal level I felt challenged and stirred (emotionally) by the experience. I also learnt a great deal, in negotiating the different social situations, age groups and language/ cultural barriers.

Meeting the children in the camps and shelters has probably had the most profound impact on me. It is interesting to reflect how different the children appeared in the two working situations (Beddawi and Saida); all refugees, but with very different states of dislocation and associated trauma. All, however, were eager to engage and to learn. I returned home with many of the children in my thoughts, and wondered about how their futures might be.

I returned home also with a clearer impression of the country's cultural, religious and historically rich context. And I returned with an appreciation of the freedom and safety that exists in the place I live.

Towards the end of the trip I came across the sea front area of the Beirut. It seemed fitting to see a more beautiful side of the city just before leaving it, that was so in contrast to all the franticness, hum and pollution. To sit amongst a few local families, many, I assumed, from the Shatila refugee camp, and watch the sun dip was a welcome relief. I reflected, at last, with fondness for this fascinating, complex and vibrant country.

