

[MUSIC PLAYING]

From Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, this is *Trending Globally*, a bi-weekly podcast bridging research, politics, and policy to address today's critical global challenges. I'm your host Sarah Baldwin.

Today we're joined by Elias Muhanna, a professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University, and an expert in Islamic intellectual history and classical Arabic literature. He is also director of the Digital Humanities Project, a research initiative of the Middle East Studies program at the Watson Institute. This is Elias reading his essay, which was recently published in *The New York Times*.

"A lesson in emotional geography." When I was a child, I spent most summers in my grandparents' home in the Lebanese mountain village of Roumieh, overlooking Beirut and the Mediterranean coast. From the swing on the veranda an expanse of umbrella pines and terracotta-roofed villages tumbled steeply toward the sea. In the evenings, my grandfather would set up a tiny portable television outside to watch the news. And my grandmother would point out at the constellations of lights across the hills, naming the villages and towns.

There is Bhannes near Bharsaf. Beyond them is Bikfaiya. But you can't see it from here. The mountain's geography was mystifying. Elevation seemed to both stretch and compress space. Villages separated by a few hundred meters of fragrant air were as distinct as planets, while the great city by the sea seemed close enough to touch.

Maps showed the road to my grandparents' home, neatly branching off the main street of the village. In reality, it torqued as it rose steeply up a hill, tracing a question mark toward the sky. That terrain was full of uncertainties. And it is even more so today, as the war in Syria, just 100 or so miles away, has worsened.

The United Nations registered over 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon between the beginning of the war in 2011 and 2015. The number today may be closer to 1.5 million. In a small country of under 5 million people, the effects of the influx seem unfathomable and their enormity.

When I tried to imagine them, it's the vista from my grandparents' mountain balcony that I see, with even more lights glowing and constellations across the valley. And it occurs to me that my grandmother's nightly cataloging of towns back then was her way to come to terms with Lebanon's own history of violent displacements. It was the late '80s, after sectarian conflict had turned Lebanon into a patchwork of confessional enclaves and no-man's lands separated by invisible borders, much like the state of Syria today. Her ritual of surveying and naming was

therapeutic. It conjured a vision of Lebanon as a reconstituted entity, territorially and politically, to replace the scenes of fracture flickering across my grandfather's black and white television.

For us children, it was a geography lesson, meant as preparation for the strange homecoming that always follows a great war. Lebanon then, like Syria now, seemed finished as a state or a coherent nation. And one day, we would have to make our way through its contorted political landscape, and find a new place in it.

One summer, shortly after the end of the Lebanese Civil War, in 1990 or 1991, my father decided that my siblings and I needed a different sort of geography class. Four children, squeezed into the backseat of an old gray and black two-door Chevy Malibu, we set off every day to explore the parts of Lebanon not visible from my grandparents' balcony. Within two weeks, we crossed the country several times, stopping in places we'd only heard the adults speak about. The Roman ruins at Baalbek, the Crusaders' sea castle in Sidon, the palace of Emir Bashir in Beiteddine, the pockmarked sniper alleys and killing fields of downtown Beirut. Few of our destinations were prepared to receive tourists.

The post-war reconstruction effort was barely underway. In fact, this may have been the objective of my father's expedition. To show his children the remains of Lebanon's first republic, the country of his own childhood.

I remember the barely suppressed looks of relief on my grandparents' faces when we returned to their house each evening, fresh with stories about the places we visited. I delighted in laying out our itineraries for my grandmother, listing the towns that we passed and the roads we've taken, especially those I'd heard her mention on the balcony on previous summer evenings. Now she listened while I spoke, our roles reversed.

On our last expedition we pulled off the coastal highway, about 10 miles north of Beirut, drove up into the hills above Jounieh, and descended into the Dog River Valley. We arrived at the mouth of the Jeita Grotto, a massive network of majestic limestone caverns that burrow for more than five miles under the mountainside. Jeita had been a major attraction during the golden age of Lebanese tourism in the 1960s. It was shuttered shortly after the beginning of the civil war in 1975.

A single soldier was sitting outside a dilapidated guard post in front of the cavern's entrance as we rolled up in the Malibu. He listened, incredulous, as my father explained that we were interested in touring the cavern. Jeita is closed, sir, the soldier said slowly. The upper passages had been converted into a munitions dump for the Lebanese army.

There was no electricity or ventilation, and no tourists had been allowed to visit the site in over a decade. You should come back when it opens again. Maybe in a few years, the soldier said, casting a perplexed eye at my mother, who was beaming in gratitude.

My father got out of the car and the two men conferred for a few minutes. Some sort of exchange took place, of ideas perhaps, more likely of currency. And the next thing I knew, we had left the noonday heat and entered the delectable, cool of the mountain.

The soldier walked ahead of us, cracking signal flares every few minutes to illuminate the caves' soaring vaults, hung with monumental stalactites. We wandered for a while before coming to an underground river. A few rowboats sat overturned near the water's edge, where they'd been left when the caverns were closed to the public. The soldiers stopped and told us it was time to turn back. My father smiled.

As we floated down the river, my siblings and I dipped our fingers into the water, marveling at its chilliness, and the echoes our voices made against the glistening walls. The soldier sat in the back of the boat, a stone-faced Charon rowing us forward toward the depths of the cave. The expression on my father's face remains one of the clearest memories I have of the trip.

It was a look of triumph. The war was over the presence of his family floating down a river in a prehistoric cavern was somehow proof of that. It was still here. And therefore, so were we.

You were born in Lebanon, I believe, but grew up in Cyprus?

That's right.

And I wonder how that experience has affected your sense of identity as a Lebanese man.

Well, yes, I was born in 1978 in Lebanon. And in 1984, my family left the country because of the Lebanese Civil War. And we moved to Cyprus, which is about a 20-minute flight away from Beirut. And we would spend most summers in Lebanon, so we were going back and forth all the time.

And although we settled in Cyprus and I did my schooling there, it always felt like we had a foot still in Lebanon. And of course, all of my extended family was still there, my cousins. And so I think, like many Lebanese who had an experience like that during the war, who left and had the opportunity to leave, to go to places like Cyprus or to Jordan or to the Persian Gulf or to the West, we do maintain a connection to this place. While also, I hope, learning something from our experience away from it, which at times makes for a somewhat tortured relationship with Lebanon. But I think it can be productive at times.

It occurs to me that you were educated in Cyprus, and then did your college and postgraduate work in the United States at Duke and Penn and Harvard. How many languages do you speak?

I don't speak very many languages.

How many do you read?

Well, I speak English and Arabic. Once upon a time, I spoke French quite well. It's a little bit rusty. I read Persian for my research, and I read some German as well for research purposes. But I would say I'm a solid bilingual, and not really much more than that.

And what do you speak at home? You have two children?

I have two children, we speak English at home. My wife is American. I'm doing my best to speak Arabic to them, because I recognize how important it is to cultivate language skills early.

And I've had mixed success with that. It's difficult, I think, to enforce a regime of one parent, one language in the home, as anybody who's tried to do that knows. But yes, the language at home is English.

So you study classical Arabic literature and Islamic intellectual history. And yet, there's something about you that's profoundly modern. You have a blog about Lebanese politics, Qifa Nabki, and you oversee this initiative which is dedicated to the digital study of the Islamic world, which already sounds like an oxymoron to this layperson that I am. And you've even contributed an essay not long ago, I remember, in *The New Yorker* about the intricacies of translating the Disney movie *Frozen* into many different languages, including Modern Standard Arabic, which oddly enough is very close to classical Arabic?

That's right.

So how do your classical and contemporary selves complement each other, conflict with each other, inform each other?

I wish I had a really terrific answer to this question, which I have gotten in the past. And I don't really have a convincing holistic theory that pulls everything together. I started blogging when I was in graduate school. And at the time, I was working on a project about a medieval Islamic encyclopedia that was composed in the 14th century.

And I don't know if it was a need to find myself in the contemporary Middle East, while I was devoting so much of my time to the medieval world, that led me to do some of this blogging work. But I guess I'm a political junkie, and I'm interested in things that are happening at home and in the region, in the Levant. So I started following Lebanese politics and Syrian politics in a close-to-the-ground sort of way-- a very inside baseball kind of way of focusing on local politics, municipal politics to some extent, electoral reform, and things that really had no

connection whatsoever with my research interests. And I think, though, over time, as I moved away from regular blogging into writing for mainstream publications, I've done a better job, I think, at finding ways to bring my academic specialty to bear on the kind of public writing I like to do.

And that piece in *The New Yorker* that you mentioned is probably a good example of something that is very much a contemporary issue. The question of translation, linguistic politics, what Modern Standard Arabic means to cultural identity in the Middle East today. And how that has a complicated history, and where Modern Standard Arabic came from, and why the Arab world did not move in the direction of the vernacular, this is all the subject for my next book. And so I think maybe with that next book, I'll finally find a way to bring everything together

Well, I hope so. So you mentioned this 14th century Arabic text, which has the terrific title of *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition*.

*In the Arts of Erudition*.

I'm sorry, *In the Arts of Erudition*. It's a 30-volume work that contains 2,300,000 words?

That's right.

Which is amazing in itself. And maybe a more recent example of that would be Diderot's *Encyclopedie*? I don't know if that's comparable, but this impulse to gather, collect, compile, and catalog knowledge is in that book as well.

And I wonder, where does this desire-- what's this fascination with encyclopedias? Do you have any idea where that comes from? Is there anything today that's as monumental as *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition*. I'm thinking maybe Wikipedia.

Absolutely.

It seems less artful, but--

Absolutely. I think that we are living at a time where we we're seeing an explosion of encyclopedism. And you can pinpoint these moments at different times in different places throughout history, different languages. The context out of which that particular encyclopedia emerged was a moment like that in the Arab world, or in the Islamic world more broadly, where you saw these enormous texts being written in a variety of subjects.

And I think that you mentioned Diderot. That's another moment where we see a lot of encyclopedism taking place in Europe. And I think that today is absolutely one of those moments, where you have Google Books, Wikipedia, all kinds of attempts to map knowledge in its different forms.

Do you think that there is so much knowledge now that it can only be approached digitally, mastered digitally.

Right. Yes, I mean that's an interesting question. Is it the cure or is it the cause of our info glut? The digital world has generated more data-- it actually generates more data on a second-by-second basis than any moment in human history, because of the technologies of transcription, of recording.

I mean, the amount of data that is generated just by Twitter on a second-by-second basis probably dwarfs the amount of data generated in an entire century. I mean, that's not hard fact. But I would imagine that somebody could probably quantify just how much data is generated through digital means. And then, yeah, you need a digital tool to navigate that and make sense of it.

I'm wondering if we can even imagine what's next. Like, what's post-digital? Is it mental telepathy? Like, if it keeps growing at this rate, how will we be able to catalog what we know?

That's really beyond my pay grade.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, we can contemplate that. And if you come up with an answer, we'll call you back in. So this beautiful essay that you just read is, in some way-- well, is about this man your father, who is reclaiming his past after a long civil war threatened to take that from him. And I wonder if you can imagine, in some future, a Syrian writing a similar piece.

I think it's already happening and I think that these kinds of scenes will take place. They do take place after any kind of a civil conflict, where people have to return home, and make sense of the territory and the landscape and the geography, and the cities that are no longer there or the neighborhoods that are destroyed. And they have to do that, because they don't have any other choice, unless you start afresh.

If you have the opportunity and the inclination, and the ability to leave and never return, that's also a story. You find that people in the United States came at some point because of a civil conflict. They were displaced from someplace in the world, and they never go back.

But the ones who do go back, I think, have to engage in an experience of sense-making. And part of that requires, I think, some sort of selective amnesia, just for the sake of their children, in order to essentially build a new future. And in that respect, maybe sometimes it's a blessing for a new generation to not have had the experience, to not have had the memories that their parents had.

So we left Lebanon when I was six, and we would go back every summer, or most summers. But because we

were children, and I'm the eldest of four kids, we didn't have the experience that my parents and my grandparents had, really witnessing the kind of brutality that took place during the civil war. So in a way, my generation had the luxury to be able to imagine alternative futures for Lebanon-- futures that were not beholden to the legacies of sectarianism that resulted in the war.

Now, sectarianism is still rampant in Lebanon. And it will be in Syria, too. But I think there is hope after a catastrophic war like Syria's. I mean, it's a cliché to say this, but it will really lie in the next generation in the sense they make of this country.

And perhaps in art. I mean, it sounds like it's going to generate a literature of displacement and reclaiming and sense-making as you say. Let's hope. Well, thank you so much, Elias. It was great of you to come in and read that beautiful piece for us.

It's my pleasure.

This has been *Trending Globally, Politics and Policy*. You can subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, and Stitcher. For more information, go to [watson.brown.edu](http://watson.brown.edu).

[MUSIC PLAYING]