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Call of Duty: When Scholars Organize in Extreme Contexts

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On August 4 2020, one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in documented history rocked the city of Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, killing more than 200 people, injuring more than 6,000, displacing more than 300,000 people, and wiping out major parts of the city. The explosion, which occurred in the midst of a major economic collapse and a global pandemic, only exacerbated a dire situation, pushing the multidimensional poverty rate in Lebanon from 42% in 2019 to 82% (approximately 4 million people) in 2021 (ESCWA, 2021). Destruction, poverty, unemployment, shortage of medicine, fuel and electricity crisis, and lack of access to basic services are a few examples that reflect the size of the recovery efforts Lebanon and its inhabitants require over many years to come.

This catastrophe was not an independent accident. It was a culmination of the Lebanese civil war and the amnesty of war crimes in 1989, which enabled sectarian warlords to transform into politicians (Geha, 2019). This led to the consolidation of a social contract in Lebanon based on sectarian clientelism (Hamzeh, 2001). Key governmental positions became filled based on sectarian power-sharing rather than job-skills match, and services and benefits for citizens became contingent on loyalties to sectarian political parties instead of the state. Corruption, incompetence, and mismanagement of the country ensued, and the war never really ended. Rather, it took shape in eruptive events such as armed conflicts, assassinations, and explosions over the years, in addition to sinking the country in debt, environmental crises, and geo-political tensions. To date, no one has been held accountable for the Beirut blast. Recovery efforts were mainly led by international and local humanitarian responders, and the ruling elite continue to fight for their personal interests at the expense of people's needs.

When living in such extreme contexts and time, with an absence of governmental support, effort, or direction, grassroots organizing is critical for the survival of many: people coming together to organize and engage in activism in the face of the major disruptions to their and others' lives (Basir, Ruebottom, & Auster, 2021). When war hits, it unsettles institutions, businesses, careers, and lives all together. As scholars, our lives and careers also get shaken. Universities' modus operandi gets disrupted. Research, student enrolment, and everyday academic life also experience major devastating disruptions. Funding gets halted and shortages in equipment leave

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many scientists unable to resume their work. As scholars, we become torn between fulfilling our academic duties of teaching and research on the one hand, and, on the other, utilizing our scholarly expertise to alleviate pain and suffering by addressing matters of critical importance to society.

Following the Beirut blast, a group of us scholars came together with other professionals, artists, and students under the umbrella of “Khaddit Beirut” (the Shakeup of Beirut), to bring back some of the dignity and wellbeing the inhabitants of Lebanon have lost (Creed, Gray, Höllerer, Karam, & Reay, 2022). We channeled our efforts to put our expertise into practice, and to transform our scholarly knowledge into work on the ground. The environmental scientists among us, for example, started measuring air pollution near the blast area to guide citizens and to hold the government accountable for how the disaster is being managed. Healthcare scholars put their efforts into building community-led health centers with students, nurses, doctors, and community members as volunteers. Education scholars collaborated with public schools to ensure their running remotely and in person. Management scholars mobilized efforts to help businesses in the hospitality industry affected by the blast get back on their feet. These are a few examples of mobilization efforts we have been working on until today. However, this was not the first time we organized and mobilized. Throughout the years, we have had to organize on multiple occasions in the face of extreme events and multiple erupting crises. Examples of these are the grapes of wrath operation launched by the Israeli Defense Forces in 1996; the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah paramilitary factions; the repressed revolution in 2001 against the Syrian occupation; then the Cedar Revolution which ended the Syrian occupation. Coupled with recurrent intrastate conflicts, assassinations, and the omnipresent corruption, organizing protests, relief efforts, and change initiatives had been a part of my life since my teens. Below are a couple of main reflections that, from those experiences of organizing across the years, seem critical for extending the lifetime of grassroots initiatives and our engagement as scholar activists with organizing in extreme contexts.

Emotional Support

Natural and manmade disasters, wars and armed conflicts, and other extreme contexts are becoming the norm rather than the exception, plaguing countries across the world. Since 2010, there has been a sharp increase in armed conflicts around the world (Pettersson et al., 2021). From Afghanistan, to Columbia, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Ukraine, wars and armed conflict are fueling inequality and injustice, and instigating major migration streams across the globe in search of safer grounds. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought this reality closer to many who previously assumed such extreme contexts are limited to the Global South and to countries with underdeveloped economies and unstable socio-political contexts. These contexts have become plausible scenarios to many, bringing about major challenges to the world.

Experiencing deaths and infrastructural destruction puts people under serious psychological strain and pain. Brain drain looms displacing many professionals, including scholars, and those who remain become stretched too thin. People experience emotions emanating from their personal experience and in reaction to the experiences of others. Fear, strain, anger, contempt, and suffering are experienced by the collective, and acts of organizing become the source of countering such emotions with hope, gratitude, and elevation. However, organizing in these times is not only important for others in dire need of support, but also critical for the group organizing, who require mutual psychological support. Collective and institutional emotional support become the antidote in these critical times. Every member of the organizing group will experience burnout, and models of working that allow for “passing the baton” and sharing the burden of the work are important for ensuring the continuity of work in a psychologically safe manner.

Career Alignment

With every extreme event in the past 40 years in Lebanon, we felt it was a possibility to shift gears, to change directions, and to influence society in a positive way. The reality is, when major disruptive events occur, a collective moral drive motivates people to organize with the aim of alleviating pain and suffering. However, it does not take long until reality kicks in and people have to go back to their everyday lives, duties, and responsibilities, turning this momentum into episodic waves of helping. For change to be sustained, continued effort is crucial. As scholars, particularly scholar activists, we asked ourselves: how can we ensure continuity of our research and careers while simultaneously helping our communities in times of need? In what ways is it possible for scholars to respond to the needs of a community at risk while also building their careers and maintaining the organization they are hired into?

The basis on which scholars are rated and evaluated shapes their behavior and decisions. While universities in general have been invested in widening their societal footprint, scholars' societal impact that takes shape in forms other than top-tier journal publications has not found its position into academic reward systems. The standards deemphasize scholars' public service as core to the growth the university and the careers of its academics. It considered as a "nice thing to do" but without top-tier publications, it is not worthy of reward in evaluations. There is also a missed learning opportunity for research in general and particularly in organization studies, from the practical engagements of scholars. One of these opportunities is better understanding the complexity of contexts and their interplay with agency. Extreme contexts are not all the same. Extreme events are typically nested within larger socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts that influence why, how, and in what capacity scholars organize in the face of disruption. A stronger harmony, balance, and alignment, between academic job requirements and practical work on the ground is needed to ensure scholars contribute where it is most critical in times of disasters and war, without having to risk their career progression as they do so.

Documentation

One unique endeavor that helped us ensure the continuity of our academic writing and research careers is the collaboration we forged right after the blast as we started our work on the ground. We created a consortium of researchers, Lebanese directly or indirectly affected by the blast and Northern Americans with no ties to Lebanon yet familiar with and sensitive to systemic oppressions. Our collaboration culminated in a team made of documentarians (North American colleagues) and scholar activists (Lebanese scholars). We spent our time strategizing for a better future and our North American colleagues spent their time supporting us through reflective and recurrent interviews. We co-designed our interviews, critically reflecting on our action on the ground, fed back those reflections into further action, all while documenting these exchanges following ethical guidelines. As such, we created a database open and accessible for all scholars involved, to use as the basis for answering critical questions about organizing in extreme contexts. This collaboration allowed us to ensure the continuity of our research and careers while simultaneously responding to the needs of the community at risk. We produced several scholarly contributions out of this experience, in our attempt to answer critical questions such as: how do we sustain collection action in extreme contexts? How does collective identity emerge in the face of extreme events? What new methodologies can serve research and the community simultaneously in extreme contexts? With this collaboration, we are building the foundation for a new form of academic collaborations across borders and boundaries in the name of greater good.

Scholars organizing in times of peace for times of war and other extreme contexts have become a necessity and not a luxury. Engaged scholarship (van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), which traditionally focused on bridging the theory–practice gap, can serve another purpose in dire times. Alongside participatory methodologies, engaged scholarship can be a potential solution for simultaneous knowledge production and societal impact. However, the route of engaged scholarship is one less traveled today, as it is considered a career risk that mainly more senior or tenured academics tend to take. Universities today have the opportunity to create models of engaged scholarship that encourage proactive organizing in times of peace for times of war in multiple ways: organizing to ensure the continuity of the day-to-day running of the institution, of research production, and of societal impact without scholars having to jeopardize their career progression. In preparing for resilience of the academe and academic career in times of war, reimagining scholarly impact with a societal footprint can benefit from integrating engaged scholarship and participatory methodologies as core to the strategic planning for extreme contexts.

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Quagmires

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What is a Quagmire?

Within a month of the Russian military launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it was clear this was not going to be a quick war. Military analysts soon started calling the conflict a quagmire. Originally a quagmire referred to swampy ground. Now it is used to describe complex, sticky and dangerous situations. Quagmires are complex because many hopeless tangled issues are at play. Quagmires are sticky because actors can’t make progress nor can they easily withdraw. Quagmires

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