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Elmaleh's case echoes our liberal limits



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Much indignation has been voiced in recent days against the actions of the Al-Manar website and television station that pushed the French actor and comedian, Gad Elmaleh, to cancel his performance at the Beiteddine Festival. That this is a free-speech concern is undeniable; however we should not underestimate the political messages also being sent.

Al-Manar accused Elmaleh, a French Jew of Moroccan origin, of having served in the Israeli army, and of otherwise advancing Israel's interests. This prompted a campaign of threats on the internet, as well as calls to boycott the comedian's stand-up show scheduled for July 13-15. Evidence for the accusations was scant and in some cases doctored, while Elmaleh's manager denied that he had anything to do with Israel.

How this reminds us of another craven campaign from several years ago, when Lebanon was still a Syrian protectorate. Back then, implicit threats were passed through a daily newspaper, probably by Syria's intelligence services, to prevent three Arab Jews from traveling to Beirut. Oddly, all were harsh critics of Israel, among them the Lebanese writer Selim Nassib and the Moroccan dissident Abraham Serfaty. Evidently, there are "acceptable" prominent foreign Jews, like Norman Finkelstein and Seymour Hersh, and there are Jews who, for obscure reasons, just don't make the cut.

Much of the reaction to Al-Manar's campaign centered on what it meant for freedom of speech and how Elmaleh's cancellation marred Lebanon's reputation. What Hizbullah's campaign tells us is that if prominent visitors happen to be Jewish, the party has appropriated the right to filter whether they enter Lebanon or not. Why should Hizbullah hesitate when its secretary general, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, declared in a September 1992 interview, that "for the resistance to survive there should be a community that adopts it and adopts the resistance fighter. This means that, in order to remain steadfast, that fighter needs to secure all the support he needs politically, security-wise, culturally and economically ..."

Put Elmaleh down as the latest victim of the resistance fighter's right to enjoy cultural sustenance. However, let's bear in mind a key difference that distinguishes the Elmaleh case (like those of Nassib

and Serfaty) from other examples of cultural prohibition common to the Arab world, which can be eminently condemnable in their own right: it is underpinned by a forewarning of violence. Hizbullah has effectively granted permission for someone to take a potshot at the enemy if he dares enter our midst. The logic is little different than Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, albeit presented in a more devious way: We, the party or the cleric, issue a general justification for killing or harming an individual, and it is up to the faithful, whoever they might be, to implement it. That is very likely why Elmaleh cancelled his trip. Even if Hizbullah was never likely to do anything against the performer, who could guarantee that a zealot, feeling he or she had gained the party's approval, would not?

Politics has also played a role in the Elmaleh affair. In so many words Hizbullah has accused Walid Jumblatt, through the festival organized by his wife, Nora, of wanting to bring an Israeli soldier to Lebanon. On one cheek Jumblatt receives Nasrallah's kisses of reconciliation, on the other he must prepare for his slaps. Hizbullah knows that the Druze leader needs better relations with the Shiites, and so it apparently intends to make him pay a high price for this. It will not soon forget what Jumblatt said about the party during these past three years, and has even accused people around him of collaborating with Israel during the 2006 war. There is not much that Jumblatt can do about it, and his recent positions against privatization and Saad Hariri's "Lebanon first" slogan were surely, in part, efforts to curry favor with Hizbullah.

No less political was the press conference on Tuesday organized by Nora Jumblatt, the tourism minister, Elie Marouni, the culture minister, Tammam Salam, and the information minister, Tarek Mitri. Marouni declared, "[T]he principal enemy of tourism [in Lebanon] is Israel. Every strike against tourism is a gift to Israel." That a Phalangist minister should have sounded something like a Baathist clerk was unfortunate, but the point was unambiguous: Hizbullah, not those who invited Gad Elmaleh to Beirut, was the one serving Israel's interests. Forgetting about politics for a moment, the Elmaleh incident tells us a great deal about the kind of Lebanon that emerged from the 2005 independence intifada against Syria. Four years on there is still no clear agreement, let alone a debate, over what kind of state Lebanon should become. The liberal spaces in the country are many, but those who want to close these down are becoming more aggressive. Hizbullah is a prime culprit, but the party can only thrive in an environment where there is no consensus over what constitutes a red line in curbing our freedoms. Liberal outrage with what happened to Gad Elmaleh has been heartening, but how deep has this been felt among the mass of Lebanese?

The real battle since 2005 has been between Lebanon's liberal and illiberal tendencies, beyond the March 14-opposition dichotomy. We can lament Elmaleh's decision not to come to Beiteddine, but what we really must regret is that we live in a society where threats still have an impact, because no one trusts Lebanon's state and society to make those threats costly. Hizbullah has won this round, and now feels it can win many more.

*Published in Lebanon's THE DAILY STAR on July 2. Michael Young is the opinion editor of THE DAILY STAR.