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## Michel Elefteriades: My favourite emperor

By [Youssef Rakha](#)

Michel Elefteriades was born to a Greek family in Jounieh, outside Beirut, just in time for the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). As a schoolboy he had only two friends: one was to kill himself at age 16; the other turned out to be a schizophrenic. "Normal" kids thought of Michel as "a retard", partly because he was impervious to ridicule. While they played cards and board games or simply skulked in the shelters, the sound of gunfire suffusing a string of deafening explosions in the open air above, he would pore over big fat books no one suspected he could understand.

A far cry from the persona he presents you with today -- at 36 he is clearly well-heeled and very self-possessed -- he would develop no social skills until much later: after his involvement in the inter-Christian shootings on the eastern side of the green line, after he went through successive ideological transformations, after he



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became a founding member of Major General Michel Aoun's Ansar troops (a late offshoot of the Lebanese Army, which Aoun commanded and turned into his own), fighting -- so, at least, he thought -- for a unified, non-sectarian city that recognized no such boundaries as green lines.

Even now, on the phone and during the first few minutes of my conversation with him, while he leads the way from the noisy hotel lobby to his "bungalow" room through a labyrinth of over-manicured garden, his conversational diffidence seems a carry-over from that steep learning curve. He appears to have difficulty clicking into talk mode, assuming businesslike and dawdling tones by turns, taking his time to order tea from room service (he wants a sandwich but they won't heat the bread, nor do they have fresh mango juice, so he settles for two pots, giving up). Once he has sensed sympathy, however, he proves remarkably loquacious; and he never makes the mistake, so common in his milieu, of confusing journalism with PR.

***With hair slicked back into a barely visible pony tail, a single large earring and a light beard cut carefully along the jaw-line, Michel Elefteriades wears mock-Ottoman breeches, complete with embroidered waistcoat, sash and dangling silver waistband; on top of this there is an angular black coat which, combined with his thin blue-grey cane, gives the impression of a magician; a stack of silver bracelets and many-shaped silver rings adorn his hands, while heavy boots give his movements a thudding ring even as his body language remains fluid.***

In fact it turns out he is very eager to reveal himself, so eager that you cannot help suspecting a strain of exhibitionism -- a thought his dress sense seems to confirm.

He does not drink or smoke, he tells me, he has never done drugs in his life, and before long he is speaking of dedication to a given task in terms of a "nirvana-like state that instils in you enormous power". It was because he always had that thing, he says, that he was looked down on at first. There is evidently a touch of the megalomaniac about him, but somehow he manages to make it endearing. Listening as intently as you can -- both the revelations and the speed at which they are made have been overwhelming -- you begin to feel you have always known this benign monster: killer, mogul and, well, colorful character, the kind that might be dismissed as no more than a "cute" exemplar of postmodern madness.

It's an assessment he is perfectly au fait with; rather than letting it bother him, he means to use it to further his literally world-changing plans. Frivolity is "a way of drawing in young people, a hook", he says; but he is dead serious. He is prophetic, he is dangerous; he was threatened by the secret intelligence of at least one world power.

Like a brilliant best-selling book -- a story of high-tech media, conspiracy theory and international espionage: Hummer vehicles, make-believe wars and sci-fi bugging devices -- a conversation with this man is absorbing, chilling and insanely intense. It challenges credulity, which must be why people have not been taking his last project to heart: he is like the protagonist of an elaborate, multinational fiction. I believe him.

Michel Elefteriades is the self appointed potentate of Nowherestan: Emperor Michel I. Sometimes he speaks with the authority of an emperor, performing a role made comic by its archaicness and his humor -- the humor of a typical *az'ar* (Lebanese Arabic for "thug") with a background in the war, dapper though he might appear to be, on occasion. More often he just relates, in detail, how he arrived at his native country -- a literal translation, in Nowherestani (that is, "broken English, or poor English"), of the Greek word "utopia" -- with a suffix taken from Farsi to grant it sovereignty.

He is a rather unusual emperor: his authority over the affairs of the state is merely supervisory; he holds no executive or decision-making power; and neither of his two sons, by a Russian gymnast, can inherit his title. Still, he is profoundly and unashamedly undemocratic, throwing a quasi-imperial frame of mind into relief.

"Democracy is a very risky thing and a very worthless thing," he declaims. "Because democracy makes it so that the politician, if there is a decision very beneficial to his people which will not get him many votes, doesn't take that decision; if there is a decision not too good for the people which will get him the votes, he takes it. They end up working from opinion polls and surveys; they're more interested in statistics than in the welfare of the people. They find out what you want, and they say they'll give it to you -- that's it, whereas the only true function of someone who's in charge of your welfare is to seek out what will benefit you, not what you feel like: a child's parents don't let him eat sweets all day just because he wants to, do they... Politics has to stop and return to its origin: a discipline of the humanities, like philosophy, like sociology..."

Equally unusual is the empire, which seeks not colonies on the ground but absolute geographic freedom. Nowherestan will have embassies all over the world -- so far only one exists, in Beirut, along with a 250-strong phalanx who perform a kind of left-wing *sieg heil* whenever they see him, muttering *votre Altasse* : an innocuous enough post-war affectation -- but no location. It is rather a nation of the mind, and its citizens' sense of self transcends the boundaries of ethnic and ideological identity: the source of all evil, as he sees it. In its ultimate formulation, Nowherestan is identical with the whole world, a place without politicians or frontiers.

Rather, 1,200 senators -- "all over the age of 60, all luminary success stories in their respective fields, all generously provided for to the extent that they can have no material ambitions at all, without salaries or bonuses, living in five-star villages built especially, eventually to be handed over to the inhabitants of the areas where they're located and turned into tourist resorts" -- make up two senates to be located at the antipodes of the globe, and shifted latitudinally every four years, while they remain diametrically opposed, making a slow circuit of the planet. The senates' job is to debate "those questions that truly concern humanity: global warming, euthanasia, cloning..." Through referenda, the senators pronounce -- and their pronouncements make up the reference points of the future.

"In democracy, my chauffeur has exactly as much of a say in euthanasia as an ethics professor whose life's work revolves around that topic. My point is -- let people have equal rights, but let them not have equal duties, when they are so obviously unequally qualified." Thus politics; as for economics, and this is where Nowherestan gets complicated, wealth is redistributed to equalize per-capita income: the world is divided into 1,000 square km territories, and wealth is relocated according to population density. "Economic equality at the level of the territories, but not at the personal level -- which is where I break with communism -- because if individuals were to have the same wealth regardless, that would kill ambition and initiative. But they will all have equal access to wealth, rather than the stark and mutually destructive differences between, say, north and south."

Michel Elefteriades is in Egypt as a jury member of Rotana TV's X Factor singing contests, through which millions of Arabs seek canned, satellite stardom; that's how I've managed to meet him, finally. He need not have stayed for longer than a day, but he thought he might as well, he says. He is keen on spreading the word about Nowherestan -- "first what the end result will be, then how to get there," as he puts it. More simply, "It's fun to be around" -- so long as you can afford it, I almost add.

It feels strange to be at the out-of-the-way Mövenpick Pyramids Hotel so close to midnight, and stranger still that the person I am talking to is something of a legend; while the conversation progresses, it remains hard to believe that he is, after all, only a few years older than I. He owns the Music Hall -- in Beirut's Starco building, tellingly, on a former green line -- one of Lebanon's most musically interesting and socially inclusive night-life venues, modeled on Middle East cabarets of the 1940s -- red velvet, wood, everything live. He has produced, among much Grammy-award-winning else, some of the fusion genre's most exciting pairings: Hanin and the Cubans, Wadie El-Safie with Jose Fernandez, Tony Hanna and the Yugoslav Gypsies, Demis Roussos with the Oriental Takht... Almost from scratch, he built Elefteriades Productions and Elefrecords, garnered the Warner Bros label, made money; he has become, in his own words, "a role model".

But none of this started until 1995, while he was living in Cuba, three years before his final return to Beirut -- Aoun himself did not return until 2005 -- when all the war's factions were granted amnesty. Then, he determined to forget about politics: a life-long, and life-threatening, preoccupation. At age 14 he had completed *Das Kapital* and was distributing a leaflet of quotes from it; the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces (originally a splinter group of the pro-Israeli, anti-Arab Phalanges) thought this was clear evidence that he was working for some enemy militia from "the western area", Muslim or communist. They took him away from the school, where they had come across his leaflets while giving a "political education" class, uninvited; they subjected him to "an interrogation" -- torture, "but I made no confession because there was no confession to make".

At 17 he organized peace talks at the *mahawir* (points of contact between the two halves of the city), having discovered that there were those who thought along similar lines in West Beirut... After Aoun's army lost its long, massively destructive war "against the occupation", for which read "the Syrians", though he will tell you that it was, in general, the notion of being occupied, whether by Syrians or Israelis -- this had involved fighting with the Forces, too, of course -- he fled to France along with the Major General, becoming a

political refugee. In 1992 he returned under an assumed name "to organize the resistance" -- which is when they booby-trapped his car, almost blowing him up; soon after that a sniper killed some of his companions in the attempt to shoot him. "So I packed my things," he says.

Judging by the frequency of that statement, it seems that throughout his life he has always been packing his things. He could no longer live in France -- a series of anecdotes demonstrate how he came to be on the wrong side of the political establishment there too -- so he went to Cuba, where he could pursue his musical interests.

"I understood that it was useless. I said to myself that, rather than wasting my time, and maybe risking my life, for something that was going nowhere, I'd better forget the whole thing," he explains. "I forgot it completely, and resolved to devote my energy to culture, thinking that it might help bring viewpoints closer together, or effect some change... But sometimes, you know, you have a character trait that you try hard to get rid of, so you repress and repress and repress it, and later on it strikes back, stronger than before."

Michel Elefteriades does not speak Greek very well; he understands it, but cannot express himself sufficiently. He gets by well enough in English, is fluent in Spanish and Italian, and speaks Romani like a gypsy. (He is, it is said, an honorary Roma, recognized as such by his Balkan and Spanish adopters.) He grew up speaking Arabic, reading French -- the language in which he thinks and writes. In this and other ways he has no clear sense of identity. Politics, one surmises, reflected the yearning to belong.

He placed himself on the left not only because it made better moral sense but, more crucially, because it was more amenable to variety. He could be Greek and eccentric, a reader or a "retard", and still he would belong. (The same drive to make room for difference was to inform his production work: pairings affirmed intercultural possibilities; the Music Hall's greatest virtue -- multiplicity.) Even Aoun's appeal was less Aoun's (by now proverbial) megalomania than the notion of the army as a protective force for all Lebanon -- agent of "liberation" and sovereignty irrespective of sect...

I am walking out of the hotel in awe. I realise it will take far more than a couple of hours to work this person out, and more than a couple of thousand words to present him. Meeting him feels like a gift. "When you are next in Beirut," he is saying, having walked with me all the way back to the lobby.

Hail, I almost say, my Emperor.

*photos: Courtesy of Michel Elefteriades*

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