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# "However, Praise Be to God:" Contentedness, Submission, and Care in Hardship

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper thinks through some of my preliminary observations in a new project on elderly care among Muslims in Beirut. It examines the work that the expression "bass, al-hamdulillah" (however, praise be to God) does in the lives of elders when uttered after a narration of hardship, and not, for example, as an automatic answer to "how are you?"—that is, when God is an intentional (super)addressee. Al-hamdulillah instills God-awareness, developing contentedness in the midst of suffering. With its focus on the here and now, rather than the future or the afterlife, it directs focus to God's gentle care in hardship. It also indexes the way certain hardships, like the economic collapse in Lebanon since 2019, have come to be perceived and lived.*

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## Introduction

It was a Saturday in July 2023; my parents were in the mountains, and I was staying alone in their Beirut apartment. "It is a good day to visit my grandmother (Teta in Lebanese Arabic) for lunch," I thought to myself; most people leave for the sea or the mountains, and the traffic is light. And this way we would not be each eating alone. I suggested bringing a mixed grill platter so she would not have to worry about what to cook. We sat, she and her on the small edge of the big dining table where the whole family used to come together for Eid. After Jeddo (grandpa in Lebanese Arabic) died and she moved to that apartment, because the old rent-stabilized apartment's landlord claimed that he wanted the apartment for his son but then proceeded to rent it to someone else. Before COVID. Before the economic collapse. Before half the grandchildren left the country. Before she started to be more tired and to fall randomly. Before she had to accept that she needed help with her all day and night, as a compromise to moving in with one of her children.

We sat for a coffee in the salon afterwards. She told me, as she had often been telling me for the last couple of years, "old age degrades (*el-kabar bibahdil*), old age is humiliation (*dhull*). *Bass al-hamdulillah* (However, thank God/ praise be to God)." At this time, she was still reeling from an episode that happened a few weeks before, when she suffered some electrolyte imbalances that caused her to faint and then be very confused, leading her children to take her to the hospital against her will. She then interrupts herself, "*lā i'tirāḍa ʿala ḥukmak yā rabb* (there is no objection to your decree, oh God)." "I have no choice, so I might as well accept my fate instead of complaining," she herself notes.

These expressions involving God (*bass al-hamdulillah*, *lā i'tirāḍa ʿala ḥukmak*), which puncture Teta's stories and observations, are partly addressed to me. In telling of her unhappiness and suffering, she is sharing what is on her mind, which she does not do much with others given her stoicism. These expressions

transform what could be seen as complaining to sharing, as both "al-hamdulillah" and "no objection" index an acceptance of this fate. But God is also an addressee, more clearly in the second expression with the second person suffix. He is made present. It is a reminder that he is part of the story. That this is all his doing.

God then appears as a third with me and Teta, a "superaddressee," as Bakhtin would call him. Bakhtin is most famous for thinking of utterances as being dialogical and polyphonous. He notes that every utterance a speaker utters presupposes an addressee who enters into a relationship with it, interprets it, and understands it. There is no predetermined meaning outside the speaker, and the addressee for the very meaning of the utterance requires the addressee: "The whole utterance is no longer a unit of language... but of speech communication that has not mere formal definition, but *contextual meaning*" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 125). But for Bakhtin, even more than a dialogic, created meaning by speaker and addressee in a particular context, a dialogue also has a *third* party, the *superaddressee*.<sup>1</sup> This is a party "whose absolute just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 126). This superaddressee has taken various shapes, but for Bakhtin, it is not necessarily a "mystical or metaphysical being," even though based on certain worldviews, it "can be addressed as such," like in my grandmother's speech, God. Other superaddressees include science, "the people," "the court of history," etc.... Even more, the superaddressee does not need to be addressed, as he is baked in the utterance because of its nature of wanting to be heard and completely understood. He represents, for Bakhtin, "ideally true responsive understanding" (1986, p. 126).

In this paper, based on intermittent autoethnographic research since 2023 (7 months in 2023 and 2026, and 3 months in 2024 and 2025) and participant observation in the last eight months, I would like to probe the way various interlocutors, like Teta, invoke God, the superaddressee, through the expression "bass al-hamdulillah," during and following descriptions of pain, suffering, and hardship. This is not the casual "el-hamdellah" used by 'secular' and religious people alike in Arabic as a response to "how are you" to mean "OK" and cut the conversation short. Rather, it is a more intentional one, uttered in an unusual situation for gratitude: when talking about difficulties. I hope to understand the work this expression does in the life of these elders living through a multitude of tragedies (their savings lost to inflation or to capital controls, a succession of Israeli wars on Lebanon, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in the world), beyond the desire for true responsive understanding. This is part of a larger project on the way Muslim Beiruti middle class retirees and the elderly have

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1. As Slater notes, the third does not have to be numerically a third person and he exists even in self-dialogue, in the same way that a dialogue can include more than two people (2007, 9).

been living through these multiple crises and the forms of care (and abandonment) that they give and receive. In Muslim theology, God is All-Knowing, as well as being All-Hearing and All-Seeing (*al-samīʿ*, *al-ʿalīm*). Teta knows that God is here, that he can hear her and knows what is in her heart. He knows that she is not objecting, without her having to explain. But she still does note that she is not objecting to His decree. Does that mean that I am the addressee in this invocation of the third? Or are these *al-hamdulillah* performative utterances made to remind herself of the need to be grateful while she is suffering, and perhaps complaining? That is, does the expression index that there is unhappiness in what one is living, and so is meant to actually deny the true understanding that the third has? But it is actually heartfelt. Following these "*bass, al-hamdulillah*" in their contexts of utterance, I show that they cultivate contentedness, conjure God's presence, expressing and instilling a trust and faith in what he has chosen for oneself and directing one to notice his gentle care. Furthermore, I suggest that they dwell in the present, however dreary, when the (worldly) future can only be worse.

## Al-hamdulillah vs. Gratitude: On God-Awareness

I was having lunch with a friend at Le Relais de l'Entrecôte in Beirut, on a quiet Saturday in January. The sunroom/ garden was lovely in the sun and away from the big birthday party of seven-year-old girls at the front. She asked me about my new research, and I volunteered "the retirees and the crisis, how they are managing, and the place of *al-birr b'-ial-walidayn* (the Islamic virtue of filial piety)." She immediately asked if I knew of Dr. Khaled Ghattas. "He is great; try to talk to him, he can probably help you. Although I am not sure you can get an appointment." I was curious about what Mr. Ghattas could teach me about filial piety and elderly care. I started with his Instagram page and his website.

It turns out it is Doctor Khaled Ghattas (b.1983, Saida, Lebanon). An "internet personality," a "motivational speaker," with over 2 million followers on Instagram alone,<sup>2</sup> he holds a PhD in molecular biology. He has also done an MBA and taken a series of (online) courses from prestigious business schools in the US (Harvard, Stanford, Cornell) about leadership, strategy, and decision-making. His Instagram page oscillates between that of a preacher (someone with a message) and a business venture (an attempt to create a brand and a product that is then monetized via lectures, books). There is an Islamic tinge that appears in one of the subheadings on his website, "*ilm^u yuntafa'u bihi*" (useful knowledge, a part of a longer *hadith* (Prophetic tradition) about what remains of a human after they die). But in his self-description, he simply presents himself as an Arab intellectual dealing with human relationships, decision-making, critical thinking,

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2. This would be a global audience, especially given that Ghattas's content is mostly in Arabic, with very few videos that have (English subtitles). For comparison, New Preacher Amr Khaled has 8.3M followers, Oprah Winfrey 22M, Taylor Swift 238M.

values, and belonging—distinguished by his capacity to popularize scientific research through storytelling.<sup>3</sup>

His short videos, the majority of his page, suggest a self-making project, aiming at, as Ghattas puts it on his webpage, "restoring balance to the lives of individuals, institutions, and communities." There are a lot of pop-psych facts (the importance of validation; the unhappiest age is 47; the need for limits while raising children; on average, three lies are told by adults every ten minutes) that are put in conversation with common practices and ideas in the Arab world. And while attempting to rebut some of these practices, some quite traditional gender ideals are peddled ("a woman who wounds her man's ego loses him"). The videos are also attuned to Arab cultural and Islamic "values." But even Quranic verses and stories and hadiths are explained for lessons in virtues, character, and coping with life—what he calls his own "humanist" interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Even though he draws on psychology and business research, Ghattas still highlights the differences between a God-orientation and these secular frameworks.

I realized that this particularity of this focus on the everyday with an interest in Islam, and its parallel with my framing of an Islamic virtue, *al-birr b'il-walidayn*, and the everyday life of elders, was what probably triggered my friend's suggestion. I even found a reel that directly addresses caring for parents. But for this paper, I want to discuss a [short video](#) that is one of the most "liked" on his Instagram page (154K) and dwells on the notion of *al-hamdulillah* in comparison with the notion of gratitude. Ghattas frames it as a critique of some "friends, people on social media, those into healing," adopting (American) positive psychology methods that invite audiences to keep a "gratitude list: 'I am grateful for my health,' 'I am grateful for my children,' ... 'I am grateful for *whatever* [in English]'. He notes, "At heart/ in essence, this form of gratefulness is very far from 'Thank God'... Indeed, to whom are you grateful when you are making a gratitude list? To nature? Chance? Destiny?" There is an unknown here, contrary to the expression *al-hamdulillah*. In *al-hamdulillah*, "you believe that there is an *entity* [in English] that is the source of this giving. This is a very different *concept* [in English]." He continues, "Why should I strip it, water it down, and lighten it and call it gratitude? I would be decreasing true awareness (*al-wa'ī al-ḥaqīqī*)." Ghattas implies that awareness of God's will in our life is the truth, and what we need to reach. Although he does not frame it as such, this is "*yaqīn*"

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3. <https://drkhaledghattass.com/elementor-621/>

4. In an interview, he notes that many assume that he is Christian because of his last name, but he is a Muslim. Yet he notes that his "exposition/ framing (*tarḥ*) is humanist."

("certainty, true knowledge, right judgement"), what is often considered one of the central virtues of Muslims.

Thus al-hamdulillah is part of instilling God-awareness, but it also seeks to cultivate an affect of contentedness. Ghattas notes in that short clip that al-hamdulillah is "*a state*" [in English], an enduring disposition. He elaborates on this affect and its distinction from psychological ways of what one may call dealing and coping.<sup>5</sup> In another post made as a series of text slides (but not as popular), Ghattas distinguishes between coping/ adaptation/acclimatization (*al-ta'aqlum*) and contentedness (*al-riqā*). The former, he notes, "is a temporary mechanism, a way for the body and brain to protect one's self. It is an analgesic to deal with pain and hardship." On the other hand, "content is an inner feeling and a conscious choice to make peace with what is happening to seek to change it."<sup>6</sup> The former "might imprison your soul" while the latter "gives you true content". The source of *riqā* is *īmān* and *taslīm* (belief and surrender). "Adaptation is the work of emotions, content that of the heart." While he does not elaborate on the notion of the heart, nor does he place it within an Islamic tradition, *al-qalb* is "the centre of the spiritual constitution of the human being, the locus within a person that is turned towards the invisible world and the divine realm" (Pagani, EI3). It is central for Sufi discourse and practice, and it is the instrument for developing ethics and one's awareness of God. It is not about "feelings" or "emotions" that we work on in psychological cures. The route to content as a feeling passes through God-awareness. And it eventually becomes a disposition, rather than simply a feeling.

Ghattas's invitation to practice "al-hamdulillah" (instead of gratitude) to *create* a "state" (of contentedness) has been noted by anthropologists of the Islamic tradition who have demonstrated that repetition of "external performative acts" creates "inward dispositions" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 135). In an article on the illness of fright caused by shocks in Zabid (Yemen) in the 1990s, anthropologist Anne Meneley addresses the proper disposition of dealing with tragedy, particularly death, one of the causes of fright. She notes the importance of saying al-hamdulillah, especially when it comes to living through loss and the death of loved ones. Keening (*al-nadb*, *al-nawḥ*), she observes, had become scorned upon (probably because of the rise of the Islamic Revival) and people were encouraged instead to "stop their crying and accept the will of God." When some of her interlocutors lost close family members and remained mourning for years,

5. In a now-classic article, Saba Mahmood (2001) elaborates on this distinction between two ways of coping with the difficult of being an unmarried young woman who is getting older, one that relies on *sabr* and the other on self-esteem. Although Ghattas and my interlocutors do not frame al-hamdulillah as part of practicing *sabr* and acceptance, this is the virtue that is being activated and developed in this enunciation of al-hamdulillah. The fact that *sabr* does not arise as much seems to be related to something I describe in the last section: the fact that the condition that people are living seems less of a transient circumstance, which shall pass too, and more as a condition and a state that is here to stay. In *sabr*, one is patient through a hardship until God relieves. But contentedness is to be cultivated to be able to live through something that has become the new normal.

6. Ghattas' focus on change diverges from the focus of Muslim preachers usually, who are more concerned with how to "bear and live hardship correctly as prescribed by one tradition of Islamic self-cultivation" (Mahmood 2001, 221).

continued crying, and did not resume their "normal" lives, they were considered to be "denying the will of God in deciding who lives and who and when and how people die." She argues that saying "al-hamdulillah" is a way to create this acceptance of God's will, as "all is from God" ([Meneley, 2003](#), p. 32). The utterance is performative, creating emotions "by the naming of them" (2003, p. 35). This is not passive submission, or what some call Muslim fatalism (a term even Daniel Pipes (2015) argues should be retired), as Sherine Hamdy (2009) also demonstrates with regard to terminally-ill dialysis patients. Rather, this disposition of accepting God's will must be actively cultivated through work on the self, including through saying "al-hamdulillah."

While Teta cultivates this awareness with her constant repetition of "al-hamdulillah," her sister, Tante Asma, attempts to cultivate awareness of God and this disposition of contentedness even more literally. She is a healthy ninety-four-year-old widow (knock on wood), although she complains that her hearing has declined of late. She lives alone, but she is very close to her next-door neighbor who has a key to her apartment and comes in and checks on her daily, sharing food, time, and more. One day I was visiting and had stopped by the TV stand while she was grabbing something from the kitchen. I noticed a green plywood fifteen-centimeter calligraphic cutout leaning vertically on the lower right corner of the TV screen. I held it and deciphered it with my eyes: "al-hamdulillah." As she comes back, Tante Asma notices me holding the cutout and starts telling its story: her niece, Leila, had invited them last year to iftar, and she had put one of these on each plate. "You know how creative Leila is!" Tante Asma liked it so much that she asked to take it home with her. She usually puts it on the TV stand and leans it on the TV screen so it is almost like a logo at the bottom of the screen. She explains: "this way, whatever I am watching, it is saying 'al-hamdulillah.'" Tante Asma does not say that the cutout acts as a reminder for her to be thankful. Instead, it filters whatever (news) she is watching—whether she is remembering to be thankful or not. The physical object al-hamdulillah acts as an extension (like her earpiece, her cane, and her phone in different ways), repeating al-hamdulillah in lieu of Tante Asma's saying it upon hearing this news.<sup>7</sup> During the good and the bad. As during the cycles of war that she and we keep living.

## Both Suffering *and* Contentedness

On March 8, 2024, a member of an NGO focused on boosting the well-being of seniors in Beirut sent a clip of a music video to the members' WhatsApp group. It was a week after the beginning of the latest round of Israeli aggression on

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7. I was considering whether to think of all these things as prosthetics, because some of them do act that way. But there is the abstraction of prosthetic from disability that happens when you use it more metaphorically (for this object rather than the earpiece for example). There is a big literature on that question because STS and cyborgs use it more metaphorically. Read the intro to the book *The Prosthetic Impulse* (downloaded).

Lebanon, this time in conjunction with the joint US-Israel assault on Iran. The group had stopped all its in-person activities. Everybody was waiting to see what kind of war this was going to be: short or long? Geographically wide-ranging or circumscribed? The clip was a two-minute extract of a [song by Egyptian singer Yasmin Ali](#), entitled "mā dā'it illā mā furigat" ("There is no hardship that is not followed by relief/There is no hardship without relief"). A few months later, the tune of the song caught my ear midday while I was typing fieldnotes at home—this time coming out from my grandmother's bedroom. I go in curious: I ask who is playing the song? My uncle, visiting her, says, I am playing it for teta! Teta seems to be enjoying it, making approving signs with her head. I ask him who sent it to him—they play on the Quran Radio on Fridays, and he looked it up on YouTube because he really likes it.

The song was released in 2020 but seems almost written for the moment that we were living in Beirut. It is the clip that has the most engagement on the singer's Instagram page. The music video opens with the artist in her living room scrolling on Facebook and seeing a post "God protect Egypt and give us victory" with the #martyrs\_on\_duty (*shuhadā' al-wajib*). The post is probably referring to the death of ten members of the armed forces in a "terrorist" attack on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 in Northern Sinai, claimed by a cell of the Islamic State.<sup>8</sup> A comment follows saying "The hardest year we have lived through. God grant relief. Heart emoji. Prayer emoji." Then another comment: "Oh Lord, we are very tired. Thank God (al-hamdulillah) for everything." The singer then gets up and stands in front of a framed quote: "Thank you God for blessing me much more than I deserve." She types on her phone and posts a reply, "There is no hardship without relief," before launching into singing these very lyrics.

The video clip continues with the singer hugging her cat before sitting back on the couch, where a man appears from behind her and gives her a hug. It is a very short appearance, but the man seems to have a disability. While the audience might assume that the man embodies the singer's personal hardship, his hugging her also makes him the source of comfort rather than actually the problem. The song moves between personal and societal/national hardship, treating them equivalently.

The song's lyrics are a few lines long

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8. \* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/3/egypt-says-18-suspected-armed-fighters-killed-in-sinai-firefight>; <https://www.dw.com/en/egypt-deadly-blast-targets-soldiers-in-sinai/a-53298176>; \* [https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A6%D8%B1\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF\\_\(%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%84\\_2020\)](https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A6%D8%B1_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF_(%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%84_2020))

|                                                                           |                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| There is no hardship without relief                                       | فرجت ضاقت الا ما ما                                                               |
| It [this particular hardship] does not remain as it is                    | بتفضلش على حالها دي ما                                                            |
| And as beautiful as it is in happy times                                  | حلو وقت الفرح وزى ما                                                              |
| We have to accept it in it sadness                                        | لازم فزعها نقبلها                                                                 |
| Al-Hamdulillah is an expression that relieves and soothes people's hearts | والحمد لله دي اكثر كلمه بتريح ويتطمن قلوب الناس                                   |
| Thank you God your blessings are many                                     |                                                                                   |
| The blessing of feeling is enough                                         | الحمد لله نعمك علينا كثير يارب                                                    |
| When hardship increases, we learn lessons                                 | وكفاية نعمة الإحساس                                                               |
| Your Lord is just, he appeases our hearts                                 | ساعات الشدة لما تزيد بنتعلم دروس منها<br>ده ربك عدل لما يريد بيرضى قلوبنا ويعينها |

The song crescendos with two lines about "al-hamdulillah," which are repeated: "Al-Hamdulillah is an expression that relieves and soothes people's hearts"; "Thank you God your blessings are many." These are the only lines repeated outside the chorus, thus emphasizing gratefulness to God. The lyrics, along with the verbs 'birayyih,' 'bitṭammin,' 'byurḍi,' and the word 'ni'ma', introduce a semantic field that expresses an affect that is the subject of my analysis here: gratefulness (*al-hamdulillah*), relief/ soothingness (*birayyah*), serenity/ quietude/peacefulness (*tama'nina*), contentedness (*riḍā*), blessing (*ni'ma*). But it is also coupled with its opposite semantic field: adversity/ hardship/ distress (*ḍiqa, shidda*). Of course, such expressions countering darkness with hope are far from unique to the Arabic language: "there is light at the end of the tunnel" or "après la pluie, le beau temps." These expressions present the hope in a future tense "at the end" and "after." This temporal sequencing exists in the song's chorus, where hardship is followed by relief, a temporality I will return to. But the song also introduces a coexistence of hardship with serenity and gratitude, even for that very hardship. It is this thankfulness in the midst of bad times that I dwell on, to understand the forms of life it enables, especially in the midst of devastation.

It is an affect that might be grating. "I keep fighting with my mum about it [al-hamdulillah]," tells me a dear friend when I share what I am writing about. "What is there to be thankful for?" she argues with her mum. It is true that it has been war after war, in addition to the banking, financial, and economic crisis. Gratefulness/ contentedness is not the first reaction to the miseries that we have lived. And indeed, Teta sometimes does say it out loud: "Life is hard." But as with the opening anecdote, she always follows it by "but al-hamdulillah".<sup>9</sup> Al-

9. The co-existence of contentedness and suffering, and the cultivation of contentedness amidst suffering, appears in various ethnographic accounts of Muslim lives. For instance, in *The Dread Heights*, Basit Iqbal describes how the Islamic tradition provides the vocabulary, feelings, and ethics for many refugees of the Syrian revolution to live and dwell in the loss, violence, pain, and devastation that God inflicts on his 'ibād (slaves / servants/ worshippers). His central interlocutor describes the experiences of women who have been displaced and settled in the orphanage he runs, as well as his own feelings slipping between we and them, as "feelings of sadness and blessing at once" (2025, 161). I engage with Iqbal's work at more length in the next section.

hamdulillah does not leave her lips, as they often say to talk about the very pious.

Teta has decided that the days are too long, and so she wants to sleep in to help time go by. So I go in at 11 AM to wake her up. She rubs her eyes, wipes her face, and asks me to pull the blanket away from her. She rolls to her side and pushes herself to sit up. As she swings her legs down to the floor, the pain in her cranky knees makes her squeak "akh akh akh". But then she immediately follows it by: "but, what do we always say? al-hamdulillah." Sitting on the edge of the bed, she looks out the sliding doors to the sky and says "ya rabb, look at me!" and then laughs at herself, "and I look at the sky!" Teta addresses God, asking to be the recipient of just a look from him, to be acknowledged. He will know what she needs, more than she does. There is no demand that is addressed to him besides that he "sees" her; there is no understanding that is pleaded. For him to be with her is the ultimate gift. Her supplication is not about communication, about understanding, but rather about presence: expressing trust in the third's choices for her life, and asking him to not leave her unattended, "unlooked at." God's gaze is invited, wished for, for it is his care.

Answering Teta's remark that life is hard, my mum remarks: "bass deyman fı lütf (nonetheless, there is always gentleness)." Even if the formulation "there is" (in "there is always gentleness") does not attribute the source of gentleness to God, the Gentle is one of the ninety-nine attributes of God in the Islamic tradition. As the ultimate embodiment of gentleness and the creator of this word, this gentleness is surely his doing. Here gentleness appears in its original form, as an "attribute of God before it becomes a human attribute," in philosopher Anne DuFourmantelle's theorization (2018, p. 37). This is not the gentleness practiced by humans like that of Basit Iqbal's main interlocutor, a Syrian refugee, as he navigates immense trials (2025, chapter 3). Here, it is God's gentleness that Teta is enjoined to sense and appreciate. Yet, again, *this gentleness is not in opposition to pain and hardship*; it accompanies them. "Gentleness has its own dialectic... For if caress, erotic games, children's bodies, fur, cats' bellies . . . are soft and gentle, the renunciation of the dying person who lets go is also gentle" (Dufourmantelle, 2018, p. xiv).

Thus, the reminder of God's gentleness is not simply an invitation to look for "silver linings," the good despite all the difficulties or that arises from these hardships. The gentleness accompanies, is nestled and conjoined with this difficulty, and can take the form of God's concealment (*satr*). Let me illustrate.

I am discussing with Tante Asma the banking and financial crisis. We are talking about her pension and how much its value has shrunk because of inflation. "But al-hamdulillah, God has bestowed his blessings on us (*allah ne'im 'alaynā*). We are much better off than others. We are *mastūrīn* (shielded/ protected/ concealed from being exposed in suffering), and it is more than enough for me. I can even

share with others." To be *mastūr* is to be the recipient of *satr*, a concept that appears in the Quran. There it denotes physical exposure to sunshine (Al-Kahf 18:90), but also the exposure of one's sins to God on the day of judgement (Fussilat 41:22).<sup>10</sup> *Satr* is used to denote various kinds of protection from exposure: whether it is one's nakedness, and the body parts that should not be exposed, but also sins, which believers are enjoined not to expose and leave to God, and in a broader sense, of concealment of what one does not want to be exposed, like poverty or humiliation. While the gaze of God is desired, the gaze of others needs to be protected from. *Mastūrīn* can also denote a sense of "we are not well off/ we are poor, but we are not having to beg, or we have a roof over our head." That God bestows *satr* on Tante Asma alludes to his gentleness, like covering someone who is asleep when it is cold out. God's gentleness appears because she has a roof over her head, because she can still pay for her own meagre needs, and even more, because she is still able to give and help others. It is also a reminder of God's presence, that he does not leave his servants alone. While he is an address in al-hamdulillah, God does more than understand completely and fully; he cares with gentleness.

## Condition, Crisis, Change

In these various moments that I describe, contentedness along with awareness of God—his presence, his gaze, his care—arise when interlocutors deal with very different conditions: war, old age, *and* their impoverishment because of the "economic, financial, and currency crisis." I want to return to war later, but for now I will note that both old age and impoverishment are treated as conditions that are inescapable or unstoppable. Of course, growing old is not given; one may die young, especially from Israeli violence, especially in certain parts of the country, but for those who live long enough, ageing and the many changes accompanying it are inescapable.

The multipronged and continuous crises would appear to be different from ageing and the normal course of life, but the way elders live this crisis today is no different. Earlier reactions and affects about the inflation and de-facto capital controls were, of course, different: from shock to anger to depression to complaints and sarcasm, the first year or two of the crises were much more volatile. And very confusing. The sudden drop in purchasing power with the spiraling of the Lebanese Lira. The queues at the gas stations. The disappearance of state-provided electricity/power. Severe medication shortages. Massive outmigration for those who could afford it. No street lights, traffic lights, or any repairs to infrastructure. The rush to ATMs. Some big decisions and changes in

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**10.** Although Abd al-Sattar and Abd al-Satir are common names, al-sattar and al-satir are not one of God's attested attributes in the Sunni tradition.

lifestyle.<sup>11</sup> The "stabilization" of the lira at around 89,500 in July 2023<sup>12</sup> and the regularization of withdrawals via circulars 158 (June 2021) and 151 (Apr. 2020, to Dec 2023)/166 (Feb 2024), along with the "adjustment" of pensions for state employees, have given back a semblance of a new normal. A much poorer normal.

This particular hardship, this poorer normal, that interlocutors are encountering appears as the continuing effect of an event that has passed, and that cannot be reversed. While for workers who are still active and currently employed in the private sector, salaries might have to some degree adjusted to the new rate, even if inflation remains painful, for those retired, employment is not an option and they are living in harsher conditions. In some ways, there is no relief, no better future for those retirees who may live yet another twenty or thirty years. For it is also the whole system on which they built their future that has collapsed: end-of-service indemnities and the high interest rate that was supposed to allow them to live off these and their savings. Even more, what will happen when people withdraw the maximum \$9,200/ \$50,000 allowed by the circulars? "They will extend the circulars," said my father. Banks already have renewed contracts following circular 151/166. In addition, the recovery of deposits in banks remains uncertain for most depositors, and so the hope is, as an interlocutor framed it, "inshallah yūṣallna ṭarṭūsheh! (Inshallah we will get some crumbs)." But even while waiting for this recovery, without new sources of income other than meager retirement salaries for some, what will happen when USD savings are used up from withdrawals? Or when the cash from the sale of immovable property has been expended? If the future can only be imagined as unimaginably bleak, as Hiba Bou Akar describes in the war yet to come, here the future was absent. With an unclear future, the hope is to extend the present, however inadequate. They dwelled in the present, finding content.

This differs from the way other forms of hardship are lived, elsewhere and here. For instance, for Basit Iqbal's interlocutors, Syrian refugees in Jordan and Canada, the theological concept of tribulation (*balā'* and *fitna*) is more central. But more importantly for my discussion here, in the midst of sieges, bombardments, and displacement, Iqbal's interlocutors always turn to God for relief. "God, grant relief!" is the mantra that they keep repeating, more centrally than al-hamdulillah.<sup>13</sup> It is only God who can end this tribulation, however much humans strive and struggle to do so. Yet, an end or solution to the current tribulation is imaginable. For refugees, the present is temporary and there is hope that the hardship passes; in Beirut, in this new poorer normal, where some

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**11.** Even if there were still silver linings: taxes and loans paid at the 1500LL rate, payments accepted half in Lebanese lira and half in fresh dollars.

**12.** The rate has been stable since (see <https://elgherbal.org/lira> for a tracking of the rates). The current rate is also being artificially maintained and thus also creating inflation.

**13.** (It is the mantra that gives its titles to Iqbal's introduction, and to which he keeps returning after each section). For Iqbal, this expression brings out the place of God's intervention in our lives, it acts as a reminder of "an essential vulnerability to the divine decree" (2025, 6).

retirees are barely making ends meet, the present is also temporary, but the hope is that it is extended indefinitely. But it is during the Israeli war that the NGO group member posted the song "there is no hardship without relief." There is no relief from old age and impoverishment, but there is from war, even if one remains grateful and finds gentleness in the present.

## Conclusion

"*Bass al-hamdulillah*" accompanies various forms of hardship, from old age to war to impoverishment. Rather than simply expressing contentedness in the midst of suffering, it instills it, along with God-awareness. While God is a superaddressee in these interjections, what Teta, tante Asma, and other interlocutors articulate in this expression is more than a desire for god's "ideally true responsive understanding." It is an invitation to be attentive to God's care and gentleness, amidst hardship. That he keeps his gaze on us and protects us from the gaze of others.

Many readers will know that "*bass, al-hamdulillah*" is not limited to elders. It certainly is more common among those who identify with the Islamic tradition, whether they practice it or not. They may recall a viral video of a Gazzan man who had lost his brother or son and who ends telling his devastating story with *al-hamdulillah*. What *al-hamdulillah* does is to turn the focus on the present, rather than a future, which might or might not be bleaker. It may be accompanied by wishes for relief in the future. But it certainly dwells in the present.

Its use among retirees and elders to talk about the financial crisis points to the way they are currently living the impoverishment that it has visited upon them as members of the middle class, state bureaucracy, and the petite bourgeoisie—particularly those who are banked. In this context, there is no wishing for relief and its future tense, for the future will only be worse. Instead, this present, where at least they are *mastūrīn*, even if impoverished, is all that remains.

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