

WE CHOOSE TO GO TO THE MOON

HOW A GROUP OF AMATEUR ENTHUSIASTS LAUNCHED THE LEBANESE SPACE PROGRAMME

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EVERY PHOTOGRAPHER BAR ONE MISSED IT BECAUSE IT ALL HAPPENED SO FAST. AND SO THE ASSEMBLED PRESS – DRESSED IN HOUNDSTOOTH JACKETS AND KIPPER TIES, CARRYING BOXY CAMERAS – WENT HOME EMPTY HANDED. THE GROWING RUMBLE, BLOOMS OF DISCHARGED STEAM AND SMOKE, THE ROCKET PAINTED RED AND WHITE, A LEBANESE CEDAR TREE PRINTED ON ITS SIDE, SOARING 200KM METRES INTO THE SKY... IT ALMOST BECAME THE EVENT THAT NEVER WAS.

The one photographer who did manage to snap *Cedar 4*'s exact moment of take-off was Edouard Témérian. His pictures formed the basis of a leather-bound album that was presented to Fuad Chehab, then president of Lebanon, to mark the occasion. The book chronicled an era-defining moment: the first high altitude rocket to be launched from the Middle East. Images of *Cedar 4* also dominated newspapers and appeared on postage stamps as an artist's impression of a cylinder painted like the Lebanese flag circumnavigating the blue marble.

But that was a long time ago in a country that had not yet been ravaged by civil war and regional instability.

The launch took place almost half a century ago in 1963.

Today, Lebanese filmmaker and artist Khalil Joreige clicks through videos from that time. In washed-out 16mm ciné film, we watch as a plume of concentrated smoke narrows into a circle of white against the blue sky.

In March, Joreige and his wife, the artist Joana Hadjithomas, unwrapped an exact hollow replica of the original Cedar rocket in the centre of Sharjah's heritage quarter, as part of the ongoing Sharjah Biennial. Pointing to the sky, painted completely white, it's hard not to see this as a deadly missile parked in an otherwise traditional Arab courtyard.

This reaction is no accident. The project is not just driven by nostalgia for the past; rather, the goal is to examine why *Cedar 4* had a collective significance in 1960s Lebanon that is not the same today.

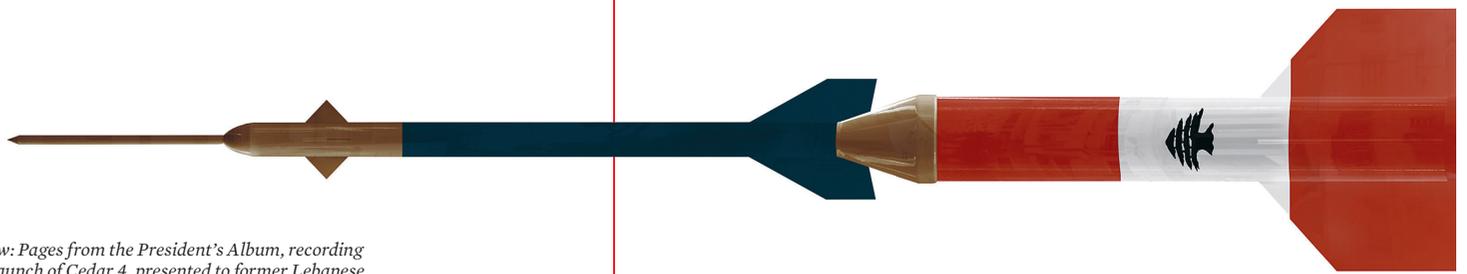
The idea came about after the two artists happened across the commemorative stamp in a collection of archive photographs. Both were struck by its nationalistic styling. To find out more, they put out calls on the radio for information and scoured Beirut's university libraries, retrieving stories about this all but forgotten chapter in Lebanon's history.

A picture began to emerge of a group of young scientists brought together at Haigazian College by a man called Manoug Manougian. When Joreige and Hadjithomas finally spoke to Manoug he didn't take them very seriously at first (although he would later come to support their project). But he did insist on one thing: *It was a project of peace, it was a project of peace.*

Manoug Manougian is an enigmatic figure in the story of Lebanon's interstellar ambitions. An Armenian-Palestinian, Manougian returned to the Middle East in 1960 and enrolled as a maths tutor at the Haigazian College after studying in Texas. Manougian had often dreamed of sending a rocket into the sky. As a child in Jerusalem, he covered his desk with carvings of rockets at the moment of take-off.

Appointed as advisor for the Science Club shortly after joining the college, Manougian did away with its lacklustre name and formed the Haigazian College Rocket Society. Members met regularly and Manougian would deliver lectures, germinating the seeds of passion amongst his students to get something off the ground. It led to the creation of a small rocket – only 45cm tall – which they launched from a farm just outside Beirut. →





Below: Pages from the President's Album, recording the launch of Cedar 4, presented to former Lebanese president Fuad Chehab at the time of launch.



It was enough to spread excitement through the institution, and plans for a larger rocket were drawn up. The entire student body was invited to the next launch. They assembled in the pine-strewn Ain Saade suburb of Beirut and watched the new rocket soar one thousand metres into the air. It was another triumph, though admittedly it did fly off in the wrong direction (a primitive launcher system was to blame) which prompted the Lebanese authorities to step in and make sure future launches wouldn't tear through any houses.

Rocket number three ascended two-thousand metres, this time in the right direction, in May 1961 – the highest altitude rocket to have been launched in the Middle East – and the project gained further momentum. In April 1962 the Cedar series of rockets was unveiled, with the launch of the *HCRS-7 Cedar*. A growing sense of nationalism attached to the space programme attracted the military's attention and the Lebanese Rocket Society (LRS) was formed at the end of 1962. Manoug Manougian was appointed as a key advisor, along with Captain Yousef Wehbe, an army official. By 1963 a three-stage rocket had been developed, with fuel reserves and boosters that would enable it to reach two-hundred kilometres into the air. It was proposed that a mouse be sent on the voyage, but when it was learnt that the creature would burn up on re-entry, Manougian's wife insisted this plan be axed.

And then came *Cedar 4* in November 1963, the culmination of an incredible dream and the rocket which Joreige and Hadjithomas have recreated and placed in Sharjah. In an alternative reality its launch would have heralded a shining future for the country as a regional leader. But the borders of Lebanon were already becoming caustic places in 1963. Defeat in the Six-Day war was only four years away and Beirut

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was becoming increasingly tense. Civil war, which would dominate the country until 1990, was only a decade ahead and rockets – dipping into cities, rather than up to the great yonder – would become a daily reality.

Manoug Manougian's story, to some extent, mirrors the fate of the country's space programme. He left Lebanon in 1966 for Tampa in the United States and would watch *Apollo 11* launch from the Kennedy Space Center three years later. He never returned to the Middle East, the LRS disbanded and the original group did not keep in touch.

Joreige and Hadjithomas were astonished by the lack of records. There were hardly any documents left, few photographs in official archives and almost no recollection amongst the general public about the events. "When it came out that we were working on this, it was a joke for so many people in Lebanon," bemoans Joreige. "They'd say things like 'Why do you care about such a project?' Viewing the space programme as a joke is a symptom of the situation we're in today."

Through Manougian the artists also got in touch with Captain Wehbe, who had worked closely with the LRS once the military became interested in the 1960s. And via Wehbe they got their hands on the leather-bound album of photographs given to Fuad Chehab on the launch of *Cedar 4*. Wehbe had personally requested the book – the only one in existence – from Chehab's widow a few years before.

The reconstruction of *Cedar 4* wouldn't have happened without this one solitary record. Joreige and Hadjithomas worked from the greyscale photographs, mapping a wireframe in CAD before assembling the rocket in the same factory in Dbayeh, just north of Beirut, where the original Cedar rockets were made.

A video of the process has been made and is displayed in Sharjah Biennial as part of the exhibition. We see serious faces in grey and white fatigues working

Far left: A replica of Cedar 4 at Haigazian University in Beirut. Left: Commemorative stamps released to celebrate the launch of Cedar 4. These were one of the first finds related to the project recovered by the artists.





Above: The latest replica of Cedar 4 to be displayed at the Sharjah Biennial. Left: The Lebanese Rocket Society members, formed from a meeting of the Hagazian College Rocket Society and the Lebanese military. Below left: Pages from the President's Album.



on a hollow white cylinder that, to eyes weary with scenes of war, looks exactly like a missile. The rocket is then seen being carried through the streets of Beirut on a flatbed truck with a police escort. "We needed to make people aware of what we were doing, to let them know this was not a rocket," explains Joreige. "And not just in Lebanon; for our neighbours also."

He says how the artists went on TV and the radio to inform the public – and anyone else who might be listening – of the project. "We know there is data mining. There's an algorithm that exists to monitor media. By using words like 'Hezbollah' and 'rockets' they start following you. So we thought this news will get to the top over there. But people were afraid, we were afraid."

The replica made its way to Hamra and to Haigazian College, where it was erected as a monument to the LRS and to Manougian's group of ambitious scientists. It coincided with the fifty-fifth anniversary of the formation of the Haigazian College Rocket Society. A second replica now stands in the courtyard of the Sharjah Heritage Village, where people can look at this reborn relic and draw their own conclusions.

"If we imagine looking at the rocket through the more innocent eyes of someone in the 1960s, would this look like a missile?" questions Joreige. "This object had a collective significance in the 1960s that is not the same today. And the only way to bring out this significance is to put it into an odd place, into a territory of art."

Joreige and Hadjithomas have worked extensively in the past on the idea of placing an object into a different context to create new meaning. In 2008 they directed *I Want To See*, a film that saw French film icon Catherine Deneuve ("who to us symbolises cinema") travel through the war-torn south of Lebanon with actor Rabih Mroue. "When we do a film with someone like Catherine Deneuve, on the borderlands – where it's not possible anymore to do something like this – we enlarge a territory. We work on the principle that Godard proposed: that cinema is one more continent."

Joreige and Hadjithomas are in the final leg of producing a film about their search for information and the reproduction of *Cedar 4*. "We are always looking at the idea of latency in our work," says Joreige. "How the interest somebody has for a moment can reactivate a certain kind of feeling. This is one idea of latency. Another is writing about history: why an event is forgotten and how it can be brought back."

Talk turns to the Three Day War of 1967 and how the region changed forever as a result. There's a suggestion that a distrust of the contemporary, associated with the Israeli occupiers and with the West as a consequence, began to take shape. Viewed through this prism you can see the ambitions of space flight as a yearning for contemporariness, for modernity. Its abandonment, then, was perhaps the shattering of that dream.

But Joreige takes it further: "Look at the Palestinian cause today. Before 1967 you were seeing a Palestinian revolution, which was linked to Cuba, to Russia. There was something in the world, not just in the Middle East. It's very important to think in a more philosophical way about this idea. At any one moment, you are the symptom of your epoch. You are not an accident; you are structured by images, events, things of which you are not even conscious."

But, he insists, it's vital to remain vigilant against nostalgia. "This is not just saying that the 1960s were better. I didn't know the Sixties and I don't want to have such fantasies." 📍

Sharjah Biennial continues until May 16. See Sharjahart.org for details