

The News
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'Go back to Karachi where it's safe'

BEIRUT: "We don't want to be a battleground for other countries," huffed Saad Hariri, son of the slain former prime minister, Rafik Hariri, implying an unseen Iranian hand in Lebanon's affairs. "Let those countries who border Israel take on the task of fighting them." "This is all about Syria," declared the equally confident George W Bush. Geography classes must have been really hard on those two. Someone ought to remind wunderkind Hariri that Lebanon shares a border with Israel. It should also be pointed out to George that what is happening in Lebanon today is not about Syria, but about Israel's extraordinarily vicious pathology and the international coterie that constantly supports its right to violence in the Middle East.

On a personal note, things at home aren't so good either. My grandfather is dying. We can see it in his eyes. He was ill when we first arrived in Lebanon a month ago. He has been ill for a while now — it's cancer. When he was initially diagnosed the doctor gave him six months to live. He has been extending that death sentence for almost four years. But since this conflict with Israel started, my grandfather, Abboud Itaoui, has begun to noticeably slip away. He is dying with his country.

When Hizbollah first captured the two Israeli soldiers, he had taken to bed rest. By the time Israel began its bombardment of Beirut, he was on a morphine drip. Today, with Israeli ground troops having entered the once liberated shores of southern Lebanon, I don't know how much longer my grandfather will last. It must seem odd, unusual certainly, for me to connect my grandfather with Lebanon, to place his health and the country's well being on the same page. But to me, my memories of Lebanon — memories of the pebble beaches of Tripoli, the mountains in Baalbeck, and the alleyways of Hamra street in Beirut — are irreversibly connected to my grandfather. It was through him that I discovered Lebanon. When I was eight years old and my family and I would travel from Damascus, Syria to the mountain village of Akkar, where Jiddo, my grandfather, was born he would read me stories at night, mixing Arabic and English both. When I was 17 years old and shopping for a winter coat that I would take to college in New York, Jiddo took me to the stores in crowded downtown Beirut. I was 17, but he held my hand as we crossed the street. Every street. When I was 20 we travelled to the Cedars, where Khalil Gibran was born and where he wrote his most famous poems. Jiddo was beginning to suffer the onslaught of his cancer at the time, but he never had anything but Gibran on his mind that week.

Friends of ours have written to us from home asking whether it would be safer for us to bring Jiddo to Karachi during this especially painful time for him. It would, but he would never leave. He was a young man when he fought in the war of independence against the French, joining the youth of Lebanon who had had enough of France's outdated colonialism. He was born here, his children were born here, and he would never agree to the idea of fleeing, especially not now. Five hundred thousand people have already been forced to leave their homes and become

refugees in foreign lands and over 300 civilians have been buried during this conflict; Jiddo refuses to add to either of those numbers. He will not run away and he continues to cling to life, with strength formidable for his age and illness.

Today I said goodbye to friends that are leaving the country, braving the uncertain roads through Syria. Israel bombarded the Baalbeck-Homs highway today, the last open road from Lebanon to Syria, leaving the country completely under siege. I said goodbye not knowing if I would see them again. Of course I would. You're being dramatic I was told. But death is on everyone's mind these days, not just mine.

New TV, a liberal news channel with the Lebanese flag placed underneath an upraised fist and the Arabic "Sameedoon" — or 'standing strong' — as its logo was showing interviews with survivors of the assault in Dahiye, a poor suburb in Southern Beirut last night. "We will stay here and die," said a young man "but we will never let them occupy our country again". He was not a Hizbollah fighter or an official of any kind, just an ordinary Lebanese man, and his statement is reflective of the spirit of so many of his countrymen.

Later on Euro News, a French channel — perhaps one of the few non-Arabic channels you find — there was footage of the now commonplace destruction you see everywhere. Buildings levelled to the ground, mothers crying, and children injured and alone. But there was something else. Amidst all the rubble were a flock of white pigeons sitting on the upturned ruins of some family's balcony. As confused as I was to see the birds sitting rather calmly in the middle of all that chaos, I was even more confused when I saw a man gingerly stepping over the rocks and the debris, a large steel cage in his hand, tiptoeing carefully towards the pigeons so that he could save them and place them in the cage, along with the yellow canaries he had already rescued.

So much of this war continues to confuse and surprise me. Friends of mine from all over the world have been frantically emailing me since Israel declared that they "would turn the clock on Lebanon back 20 years", worried for my safety and begging me to find a way out. I've gotten emails from Israeli friends of mine in New York, from loved ones in Karachi, and from those across the border in Damascus. "Go back to where it's safe." read one email from New York, "Go back to Karachi." This very friend, I might add, has refused to visit me for years on account of how dangerous and frightening Karachi sounded when viewed through the lens of Fox News pundits and the New York Times.

I wish I could tell everyone who emails that I am infinitely lucky. Lucky to be here with my family, to be stranded among such brave people, everyday people whose courage makes me feel like I am in the presence of giants. I am lucky for so much more. I am lucky not to have lost as the people of Tyre and Sidon have. I am lucky not to be among those 300. I am lucky that I don't have to rely on CNN or the Wall Street Journal for information. I am lucky not to be 18 years old from Tel Aviv, about to be drafted into the IDF. I am lucky to witness the power of resistance and to have front row seats to the battle of David against the new Israeli Goliath. But most of all, I am lucky to have my Jiddo, who continues to show me Lebanon and the character of its people through his eyes