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Leaving Lebanon

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

This week marks the one-year anniversary of the Israeli-Lebanese war; it marks the anniversary of a month of unrelenting, mindless destruction and thousands of unnecessary Lebanese casualties and fatalities. The United Nations estimates that of the thousand Lebanese killed during the war, mainly civilians, over 30 per cent were children. There are unexploded mines still lying dormant on Lebanese soil and billions of dollars worth of damage to Lebanese businesses, homes, and infrastructure.

As we left Lebanon, at four in the morning on July 31, 2006, the war was still raging: The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) were dropping leaflets over Sunni neighbourhoods warning them to stay away from 'those Shiites' and advocating sectarianism. Hugo Chavez was pulling Venezuela's ambassador from Israel in protest of their genocide in Lebanon. The Christian town of Marjoun had all its major bridges and roads destroyed by the IDF. Ambulances and media vans were being purposely targeted by IDF warplanes. Syed Hasan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hizbollah, vowed to hit Tel Aviv if another strike on Beirut was launched. Tony Blair, laughably now a Middle East 'peace envoy', was forbidding newspapers in England from publishing photographs of the carnage wrecked by Israel and obeying Washington's request to stay mum on the notion of backing a cease fire.

We left Lebanon via the Baalbeck-Homs highway for Damascus. The highway had been shelled only once before and we figured it was our safest option. I kept repeating the 'safest option' in my head over and over again as we made our way through to the Syrian border. Along the way we saw buildings broken down to the last brick, Lebanese army barracks wiped out by the IDF. We saw houses on fire, houses burnt black and wilting and earth scorched dry.

We reached the border close to seven in the morning; there were a few people at the post but no longer were there the domino lines of cars and refugees that we had seen on the news. My mother went into a small building with our passports and while Zulfikar stretched out in the car Mir Ali and I chased birds across the open parking lot. There was a woman there holding a very young baby. She was obviously distressed and arguing loudly with the immigration officers while her husband sat by their suitcases. She was Lebanese and had married a Syrian man. Her child was born in Syria and didn't have any papers yet -- no passport, no visas. While everyone else was trying to flee into Syria, she was trying to go back to Lebanon. Her family was there, she explained. I tried not to eavesdrop but in my defence she was speaking extremely loudly. The officials kept telling her to calm down. They would arrange papers for her child, it would just an hour at the most, but she was adamant -- she had to get to Lebanon now. It was like we were in a

parallel universe, with the same manic pitch and frenzy that people were employing to get out of a war zone, she was using to get back into one. She was returning, not escaping.

We didn't feel like refugees in Damascus, it had been our home for many years. But we had left one war zone for another potential battlefield. I was with my childhood friend Nora when we first heard the rumours on a Tuesday night. Her phone rang and a friend told her what was being reported on local TV. There was going to be an air raid practice -- the government announced that at midnight they would shut the electricity throughout the city and the air raid siren would be tested. Reservists had already been called back to the army and soldiers were being moved along the borders. The president, Bashar al Assad, issued standing orders to the army: Upon receiving Israeli artillery fire, fire back immediately. Don't wait for orders, he said, defend yourselves.

Nora and I called our mothers and told them about the siren test.

"Good" my mother said.

The Syrians were not shying away from the possibility of entering the war against Israel. Their government warned that if Syria was the landing site of even a stray Israeli bullet, the IDF would find itself confronting a new army. The mood in Damascus was what I can only describe as strong. At the roadside stalls where vendors were selling cactus fruit, only in season during the late summer months, there were posters of Nasrallah and Assad. There were billboards of the intertwined Lebanese and Syrian flags put up on all the main roads by local companies. People were buzzing with stories about what might happen, how it might happen, and when it might happen.

My mother and I wanted to go see the statue of Salahuddin el Ayoubi, who liberated Jerusalem from one hundred and fifty years of occupation under the crusaders. When asked about the Palestinian struggle to return to their land, the late president of Syria Hafez al Assad used to say "It took Salahuddin 150 years; we've only gone through 50. We have another 100 years to reclaim Jerusalem". I had only just discovered that Salahuddin was buried in Damascus and was eager to visit the statue. At the back of my mind was also the morbid thought that if Damascus entered the war, I might not get to see the statue of Salahuddin for some time. When Zulfikar, Mir Ali, and my mother and I got out of the car in the old city we saw that sitting atop his horse Salahuddin now carried the yellow and green Hizbollah flag in his left hand. Someone had tied it to his statue with some red rope. We took our picture next to the statue and left. Mission accomplished.

The war really hit home for us, however, because of a personal loss. Jiddo, my grandfather, slipped into a coma the very morning that we left Lebanon. We had said goodbye to him at four am and by the late morning my Aunt Khoulood, a doctor by profession, could not wake him up. They telephoned us in Damascus that Monday and told us that Jiddo was in coma. "He was living to see you three," my mother told us. "You were keeping him alive".

We had spent a summer hoping for the best and we were committed to continuing. Jiddo had bad days before; he had been fighting cancer for the last four years. He'll pull through, we told ourselves, he always did. But he didn't, not this time.

We awoke on a Thursday morning to the news that Jiddo had passed away. "We can't go back" said my mother. Our family had not told us about Jiddo's passing until a day later, on Thursday, the day before our scheduled flight to Karachi, because they were worried that we would try to return to Lebanon. The roads between Syria and Lebanon were being shelled with a renewed gusto by the IDF, we had been lucky to have made it across when we did. The roads from Tripoli to Akkar, the village where Jiddo was born and where he would be buried, were also being bombarded. Teta, my grandmother, had managed to take his body to Akkar by using a different and longer route, but even that was not safe. Mind you, there is nothing in Akkar to bomb. There are no Katyusha rocket factories, no oil refineries, no power plants. The only thing of note is a Palestinian refugee camp. But this was Israel's war and all of Lebanon and its people were deemed legitimate targets.

I tried to convince my mother that there was a way, that we could make it to Akkar. She was so sad. I wished that we had not said our goodbyes so soon. But we both knew there was no way for us to return. We had to go home.

At the airport, before boarding our flight to Karachi, my mother went to call Teta to say goodbye. She had run out of Syrian Liras so she walked towards the nearest currency exchange desk. "I'd like to exchange some money to make a telephone call" she said. The man behind the counter nodded his head and waited for the money. When my mother opened her wallet and the man saw that it was Lebanese Liras she was taking out he started shaking his head. "It's all I have" she said offering him the five thousand Liras. He refused her money. "Please. Keep your money, here are ten Liras - that should be enough for a call". He gave her the coins. Even in her dark Shalwar Kameez, my mother was a Lebanese. We were all Lebanese then.

Three days after we reached Damascus, the IDF attacked the Baalbeck-Homs highway and killed 33 people, mainly poor farmers, in what was called Israel's second massacre of the war.