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Tripoli — a ghost town

By Fatima Bhutto

TRIPOLI, Lebanon: Yesterday I was walking back home with Mir Ali. Mir Ali is my little brother. He is two years old. I had picked him up from the nursery he's been attending a few streets away from where we live. He was in a foul mood and insisted on crying most of the short walk home. I noticed two trucks outside the hospital next to our building and pointed them to Mir Ali, hoping they would distract him. It worked. We stopped and looked at them. Five men were crowded around the trucks, lifting large bags up to the men on the hospital roof. They were sandbagging something. It seemed only slightly interesting at the time.

This morning the IDF hit several targets in Tripoli. They bombed the sizable Palestinian refugee camp in Badawi, a petroleum refinery, and the city's main cellular tower. The sandbagging now made sense. What didn't make sense, however, was how I managed to sleep through the morning's assault.

The first time Tripoli was hit it was one in the morning. The IDF struck the Tripoli port, a short distance away from where we live. The bomb whizzed through the sound barrier and exploded making our entire building shake. Zulfikar, my brother, and I jumped straight into action. We locked the steel door outside the apartment and began taping all the windows in the house. We moved furniture away from the windows and we refilled bottles of water, safeguarding against another water and electricity cut. Neither of us could sleep much for the rest of the night.

This morning's bombings, on the other hand, didn't even make me flinch. I suppose that's what happens after eleven days of perpetual Israel bombardment. Tripoli was like a ghost town today. All the stores shut their windows and the streets were completely deserted. Most of our neighbors had packed their bags and headed towards the mountains, the war was getting closer. Not even Tripoli was safe anymore. We were housebound for the rest of the day.

Syrian TV broadcasted a special show today; they broadcasted the words and poetry of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. Darwish had been taped years earlier in Damascus, speaking of the Palestinians struggle. "If they cut off my arm," said Darwish, "take it and throw it against the enemy". "If they kill me, take my body and throw it against the enemy. Use my body as a weapon against the enemy. In this battle, we either exist or we do not" resist, resist, resist.

"This is the battle that will bring us peace," Fawaz Trabulsi, a professor and communist intellectual, said later in the day, "an honourable peace, not the peace of the Oslo accords or the Saudi plan for peace". I met Fawaz once; he was hosting the late Edward Said at the American University of Beirut. I felt relieved to see him on TV and to know that he was alive and in good spirits.

I didn't feel the same way when I flipped the channel and saw Condoleezza Rice speaking of a "new Middle East" being born. She scoffed at the idea of even a temporary ceasefire. She offered the IDF powerful weaponry from Washington and blamed Syria and Iran for supporting Hizbollah. Condi can do and say all she wants standing atop her little podium, but she'll have to answer some tough questions. Is this "new Middle East" going to turn out like the "new Iraq"? Or perhaps the "new Afghanistan"? Will they also bring the Lebanese that curious American import, "freedom"? I hope they don't forget to bring some "democracy" too. As for the accusations of Syrian or Iranian help to the Lebanese resistance, why is it so hard for Condi to remember that Hizbollah is an indigenous resistance group? They live in the South, that is where their homes are. They know every nook and cranny of the place, every pebble and every path. When they finish their operations, they don't go to the airport to fly home. They are home. They are not foreign fighters. They belong to Lebanon. Maybe the IDF is having trouble finding Hizbollah fighters because they know how to merge with their landscape, they are their soil.

The problem with states like Israel and the "new United States" is that they think decades of oppression and occupation weaken those who suffer them. But it only makes the oppressed and the occupied bolder and stronger. A young woman from southern Lebanon was speaking on Al Manar today. Al Manar is the Hizbollah affiliated channel and is viewed as a reliable news source worthy enough for other channels to screen their footage and borrow their exclusives. The young woman was walking on the street when approached by the cameras. Her head was uncovered and in place of a Hijab, she was sporting a red bandana on her head, fashionably keeping her hair off her face. She was in jeans and black cotton shirt. "We are so proud of Syed Hasan Nasrallah," she said speaking of Hizbollah's secretary-general, "I wish I could get a hold of an Abaya of his, one that he has worn and has sweat in, so that I could wrap myself and my baptize my children in it. I would cut it up and distribute it in the streets for all the people who are crying for the loss of Lebanon's tourism industry so that some of his honour and commitment could rub off on them". I looked around the room at my mother and aunts; they weren't cringing at the sweat comment as I was. They were nodding their heads in mesmerised agreement. "I will live without water, I will live without electricity, and the tourism industry will bounce back," she continued, "just let them keep fighting".