

Beirut, one year later: The English version

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On my first day in Beirut, the man who sold me a newspaper told me, “Many things are strange in Lebanon. Here, the strange is normal.” I wanted to answer, in a casual tone, “I know what you mean. I’m from Tel Aviv, and normal life can seem pretty strange there, too.” I wondered if the kiosk philosopher would think it strange-but-normal that an Israeli tourist was wandering around Beirut, one year after the war. And I am not sure I can describe how strange it was to feel simultaneously very comfortable and very fearful as an Israeli in Lebanon.

Exactly one year after that 34-day explosion of violence that is called the Second Lebanon War in Israel, and the July War in Lebanon, I went to Beirut because I was pulled by insatiable curiosity. An avid follower of the lively, opinionated Lebanese blogosphere, I was fascinated not only by its political diversity, intelligence and irreverence, but also by the descriptions and photos of ordinary, middle-class, secular, Beirut life, because they sounded so much like life in Tel Aviv. According to friends who had visited Tel Aviv and Beirut, the cities were strikingly similar.

Last summer, Time Out Tel Aviv editor Amir Ben-David wrote about his friendship with Ramsay Short, the former editor of Time Out Beirut – how they clicked immediately upon meeting for the first time at a Time Out conference in May 2006, and how their friendship was strained to the breaking point by the war. I identified strongly with Amir’s story, and blogged about it, because I, too, had met and become friends with a Lebanese man around the same time. We became acquainted on the internet, met and became friends when he visited Tel Aviv on business, and then our friendship was severely tested by that 34-day explosion of violence and destruction.

But our friendship survived. And unlike our countries, which are still licking their wounds, it is now stronger than ever.

After the war ended, I continued to follow the Lebosphere. I was particularly interested in the descriptions of ordinary middle class life in Beirut, which continued despite all the political crises over the ensuing months – the dangerous stalemate between the government and Hezbollah, the assassinations of prominent politicians, and the battles between the Lebanese army and Fatah el Islam in Nahr el Bard. It seemed that Beirut was a city characterized by a *joie de vivre* that remained unaffected by the unstable and violent political situation, just as Tel Aviv’s spirit never flagged even during the worst periods of suicide bombings, intifada and threats of war.

During last summer’s war there were hardly any men at the gym or at my yoga class in Tel Aviv, because so many of them had received emergency call-up notices for army reserve duty in the north. But the cafes were still packed and the clubs were at full throttle, even though all three Israeli television stations were broadcasting ‘round-the-clock coverage of the war – including Hassan Nasrallah’s threat to bomb “baada baada Haifa” (beyond Haifa – i.e., Tel Aviv).

Around that time, I read an article in the New York Times which reported that middle-class Lebanese continued to meet at cafes, patronize clubs and enjoy life even as Shi’a districts just a few kilometers away were being pounded to rubble by the Israeli Air Force. Tel Aviv was the target of scurrilous populist attacks because its denizens insisted upon normal life during the war. Some claimed this was unseemly, given that tens of thousands of northerners were

sweating out the summer in bomb shelters. Yet that same Tel Aviv hedonism was interpreted as bravery when suicide bombers regularly targeted the city over a period many months in 2002 and 2003. Similarly, middle-class Beirutis were, according to the article in the Times, accused of indifference to the suffering in the south during the summer war – but I remembered they were admired for their unflagging spirit when the city was torn by civil war.

All these similarities made me feel a strong empathy for Beirut.

But there is a big difference between reading about a place and feeling it. I wanted to experience Beirut, and to see it through the eyes of an Israeli / Tel Avivian. So I bought a ticket and got on a plane.

THE JOURNEY

Given that Lebanon and Israel are technically in a state of war, it is surprisingly easy to travel from Tel Aviv to Beirut. Journalists, religious pilgrims and international businesspeople do it all the time, and there are travel agents in Israel who can book flights to Beirut via agencies in third countries like Jordan, Turkey or Cyprus. When my travel agent told me that the price for my hotel room in Beirut was nearly double what a friend who recommended the place had paid, I just called the hotel directly, from Tel Aviv, confirmed the lower price and booked the room.

There were a few small technical problems, though. I could not use my Israeli credit card in Lebanon, and I could not buy traveler checks that showed the logo of an Israeli bank, so I had to bring cash -- American dollars -- and hope I did not have any expensive emergencies. I couldn't use my Israeli mobile phone in Lebanon, because it had Hebrew letters on the keypad, so I went to South Tel Aviv and bought a cheap mobile phone with Russian and Latin

characters instead. In the end, though, I did not use it, because a SIM card costs an exorbitant \$100 in Lebanon.

Since I could not bear to be parted from my laptop for an entire week, I covered the Hebrew letters on the keyboard with stickers that showed English and Arabic characters. I also used small scissors to cut all the Hebrew labels out of my clothes – just in case.

Tel Aviv-Amman-Beirut is a very Middle Eastern flight: it's a waste of time, it's completely illogical and it's a bit of a charade. Arrive at Ben Gurion Airport three hours in advance of a 20-minute low-altitude flight to Amman. Wait several hours at Queen Alia Airport, where the toilets are filthy, clouds of cigarette smoke obscure the no-smoking signs and an hour of Internet access costs seven dinars (\$10). The charade was played in the transit lounge: the airport employee at the transit visa counter, who could see on the passenger manifest that I was flying to Beirut from Tel Aviv, matter-of-factly asked me to double-check that there were no Israeli visa stamps in my Canadian passport. Meanwhile, Israeli businessmen carried on loud mobile phone conversations in Hebrew while waiting for their flights to the Gulf region, and Israeli backpackers on their way back from India plonked themselves down on the floor to talk about Goa trance parties and Vipassana meditation retreats while they waited for their connecting flight to Tel Aviv. Then the flight to Beirut: 40 minutes in a propeller plane, below cloud level, over the brown Jordanian desert. And then, suddenly - green expanses, the blue Mediterranean, a sun-kissed, mostly low-rise city hugging a beach. If I had just woken up from a nap, I might have thought I was landing in Tel Aviv. But it was Beirut.

I waited nervously as the passport official at Rafik Hariri Airport swiped my Canadian passport and stared at his computer screen. Would my undeniably Jewish last name arouse any suspicion? Are there databases that show dual citizenship? I wondered if there were secret service men watching me via closed camera, waiting to arrest me while I was waiting for my suitcase to be unloaded.

The handsome airport employee startled me out of my paranoid Middle Eastern reverie. He stamped my passport with a loud thump, smiled charmingly and told me I could extend my one-month visa for up to three months.

WELCOME TO LEBANON.

Same-same, but different

Like Tel Avivians, Beirutis are warm, open and casually friendly – although they are far more courteous, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. I enjoyed many fascinating human encounters, and edifying conversations, with people I met in shops, cafes, restaurants and clubs. Israelis gave up talking politics, out of disgust, weariness and lost hope, somewhere between the collapse of the Oslo Accords and the umpteenth government corruption scandal; but Lebanese still had plenty of energy for heated debates about current events. It seemed as though everyone I met had an opinion to share – and those opinions were often surprising.

The spontaneous conversations I enjoyed in Beirut helped me gain a visceral understanding of the political tension in the city - of the hope mixed with foreboding and, sometimes, of the despairing attachment to a city that was so easy to love, but too often betrayed that love with political violence and instability. So many people told me they loved Beirut, but felt compelled to leave because they were afraid of another civil war, or because they were convinced the current political stalemate, and resulting economic crisis, would not end anytime soon.

I discovered that one could never predict political opinions based on appearance. The taxi driver who wore a jalabiyah and spoke only Arabic made a face and said “Fuck Hezbollah, I’m Lebanese!” when he saw me photographing a Hezbollah flag.

On the other hand, the hyperkinetic, French-speaking, middle-class Christian musician I met at a nightclub told me that, while he was not a Hezbollah supporter, he knew some very nice people who were active in the Party of God. Then he told me that one of his closest friends was a French-Israeli musician with whom he had shared a flat in Paris. “Of course I made sure

that he did not support Sharon!” he assured me only half-jokingly, speaking English with a strong French accent. “Otherwise I would have had to keel him!” A week later, when I was already back in Tel Aviv, he sent me an email that opened with a greeting in Hebrew, written in Latin characters. “How did you guess?” I wrote in response. He wrote back that he had searched for me on Google, and had no problem with my being an Israeli. He wanted to know when I was coming back to Beirut to visit him. Unfortunately, not all the people I met in Beirut shared this attitude. One guy, a Palestinian journalist, wrote me an angry email after learning that I was Israeli; in it, he stated that he never wished to hear from me again.

Beirut seduced and fascinated me, but it also frightened me. I loved roaming the different neighborhoods, figuring out how to navigate the city on my own despite my abysmal sense of direction, talking to people in shops and cafes and exploring the nightlife. It seemed that every person I spoke with had an interesting story to tell, or observation to make. On several occasions I was the recipient of spontaneous and touching hospitality.

Once, for example, when I asked a young man I’d just met if there was an all-night pharmacy nearby, he insisted on driving me to the pharmacy because he thought I might not find it. He even waited outside to make sure I found what I needed. On another occasion, when I stopped in at the little grocery store near my hotel late one evening, I found the proprietor enjoying a whiskey with a friend from the neighborhood. They invited me to join them: the proprietor pulled up a chair, the neighbor darted back to his apartment to bring me a clean glass, more peanuts were added to the bowl and a long, enjoyable conversation ensued.

But a few times a seemingly normal, friendly, encounter turned ominous – because I let slip a careless remark that aroused suspicion, or because I unwittingly pointed my camera in what turned out to be the wrong direction. Or simply because there were so few tourists in Beirut, due to the political crisis, that my mere presence invited unwanted questions for which I had no convincing answers. Suddenly, a friendly, animated face could turn hard and suspicious. On those occasions I felt the ground shift beneath me, and I inhaled the fear and paranoia that bubbled away beneath the city’s attractive Levantine surface.

THE PARANOIA AND THE FEAR

The first person who made me aware of Beirut's perils was actually an American academic who had been raised in the States by Lebanese parents. I met Najib at a café in Hamra on my third day in Beirut, when he smiled at my confusion as I dithered over the unfamiliar local currency while trying to pay for my iced coffee. An exchange of smiles led to a conversation, and pretty soon we were having an interesting talk about Lebanon in general and Beirut specifically. When I expressed an interest in Beirut architecture, he told me he knew a lot about the subject and offered to take me on a walking tour of some interesting areas. With his American body language and his rumpled, baggy shirt and cargo shorts, and his admission that he had only learned Arabic as an adult, Najib seemed familiar and unthreatening. So I didn't feel I was taking a risk in telling him my last name, or that I lived in Tel Aviv. But it turned out that I made a mistake: Najib was more Middle Eastern than American, after all.

The following day, after a night of bar hopping that had produced what was quite possibly the worst hangover of my life, I saw Najib at Café de Prague, a popular student hangout near the American University of Beirut. I was pretty sure he had already seen me, but assumed he had ignored me because he was involved in a conversation. So I went over to say hello, and asked if we could still meet for his promised tour of Beirut architecture. I mentioned that I had gone out drinking the previous night in Gemmayzeh, a night-life hub that was remarkably similar to Tel Aviv's Lilienblum Street, and had a terrible hangover. He did not respond to my chatter, nor did he smile in return. Suddenly he interrupted me and, with a hard, suspicious look on his face, asked "Lisa, what are you really doing in Beirut?"

There it was – the paranoia. I looked at him and said slowly, "Najib, I'm doing exactly what I told you yesterday. I'm going to write some human-interest articles about the atmosphere in Beirut one year after the war. I don't have any nefarious intentions, and my life is pretty much an open book. Google me and you'll see. But if you don't feel comfortable meeting me again, I'll understand. No hard feelings."

"Okay," answered Najib. Meaning, okay – let's not meet again.

That was the first time I felt the ground shift beneath me, and I was afraid. As I walked away from Café de Prague I cursed myself for my indiscretion. What if this guy Najib told the wrong people that there was an Israeli journalist wandering around Beirut? Had I told him the name of my hotel? By the time I'd walked another hundred metres, I had revised my itinerary for the remainder of the week. Several people – Lebanese and foreign reporters, mostly – had warned me strongly against entering the dahiye. They told me that the outskirts were iffy, but the interior was a real risk: Hezbollah security guys on mopeds patrolled the streets and frequently stopped, questioned and requested identification of strangers. Two reporters told me that they'd had their names googled at a checkpoint leading into the so-called security square in the middle of the dahiye, where the senior Hezbollah members lived. A blonde, blue-eyed Beirut woman who sometimes worked as a translator for foreign correspondents told me she was harassed by Hezbollah security the last time she took some journalists to the dahiye. "They tried to stop me from walking the streets and taking photographs in my own city!" she said heatedly. A couple of people who lived in the dahiye said they would not run the risk of showing me around their neighborhood.

Despite all those warnings, my original plans did include a visit to Beirut's southern suburbs. I figured I'd just hop into a group taxi (service), then wander around on foot as long as I felt comfortable. I was still in the Israeli mentality mode of "yihyeh b'seder" (everything will be okay). But after my encounter with Najib I realized there was a difference between a risky adventure and a stupid one, and I had no desire to share a cell with Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev. So I did not go to the dahiye, or to southern Lebanon. And I did not return to Café de Prague.

In avoiding the Hezbollah-controlled areas I would, I realized, be limiting myself to a relatively narrow slice of Lebanese life – much as a tourist in Israel who visited Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv and the more salubrious towns of the Galilee, but not the impoverished development towns or the Arab villages, would

have an incomplete picture of Israeli society. On the other hand, there's a lot to be said for depth over breadth. As it turned out there was plenty to see and experience in Beirut ex-dahiyeh, and in the towns immediately to the north of the city.

BEYOND SECTARIANISM

Shortly after the war I learned – again, via the blogosphere – that the dahiyeh is not occupied exclusively by Hezbollah and its supporters. Not until I visited Beirut, however, did I meet people who lived in the dahiyeh but told me they were completely secular Shi'a – or, in one case, not Shi'a at all. This might come as a bit of a shocker to Dan Halutz, but the fact is that not everyone in Beirut's sprawling southern suburbs believes Hassan Nasrallah is the messiah. In fact, quite a few of those I met seemed not to like him very much at all. Living in the dahiyeh is, for many of its residents, not a choice made out of political ideology; it is one of financial necessity. Salaries are low, and housing in the dahiyeh is cheap.

One day, whilst browsing in a bookshop, I struck up a conversation – okay, more of a flirtation – with a handsome, well-dressed young man named Said (not his real name) who told me that he lived in the dahiyeh and that he hated sectarianism. “I am Lebanese and that's it,” said Said. “I eat in the homes of my Christian friends – no problem. And I can pray just as easily in a church as I can in a mosque.” Then he grinned at me impishly and said he had a suggestion for me. “Listen,” said Said. “You're Canadian, yes? Are you married? No? Okay, so here's my idea. Let's get married and go live together in Canada. We'll live in the same house, but just as friends – nothing, um, physical. Of course I won't see other women, because that would be disrespectful. If, after a while, we decide that we like each other, we can have babies and make a life together. I am educated, loyal and hard-working, so I'm sure you'd be happy with me.” Then he leaned forward and whispered, “And, of course, you are beautiful.” I rolled my eyes and laughed as he lifted my hand and, in a gesture worthy of an

actor in the Comedie Francaise, brushed his lips over my knuckles and looked at me meaningfully.

Placing the just-kissed hand over my heart with a theatrical gesture I bantered back, “Said, I just don't know how to respond to your offer. You have touched me. Deeply. Would you allow me to think about it until tomorrow?”

“Of course!” laughed Said.

“So what's the deal?” I asked. “Aren't you happy with your life in Lebanon?”

“Not even one percent,” answered Said, for the first time betraying a little bitterness. “Today I received my salary. After I pay all my bills, I will have four dollars left. I have been working here for six years, six days a week, I have a university degree, and I earn six hundred dollars per month.” Apparently reading my mind, he continued, “You're probably wondering how people like me manage to dress well on such a low salary, right?” Actually, I did wonder. I knew the prices of Said's name brand jeans, shirt and sunglasses and I couldn't afford them – not unless I restricted my diet to lentils and rice and gave up my café-dwelling ways. Said's hair was fashionably cut and he'd doused himself in Eau de Expensive French Cologne, too. He explained simply, “We don't buy a lot of things, we live at home and relatives help each other. Like, during the war: We went to stay at my aunt's house in the mountains.”

I asked Said if he'd received his salary during the war. “Sure,” he said. “But after the war they told us that the month was forced vacation.” Then he shrugged his shoulders fatalistically. “That's Lebanon. You can't fight it.”

In answer to my question, he said that his family's apartment was not seriously damaged because it was not near the Hezbollah-dominated part of the dahiyeh. Only the windows were broken, he explained. “Did Hezbollah compensate you for the damage caused to your apartment during the war?” I asked him. “Compensate?!” he sneered. “Only the people who belong to Hezbollah received money. My family did not receive a grain of rice from them – and not from the government either. We paid for the new glass ourselves.”

Sectarianism was a dirty word for a lot of the secular,

middle class Beirutis I met. “I’m Lebanese and that’s all,” was a sentiment expressed by the Armenian bar owner in Gemmayzeh, the taxi driver who wondered why I was photographing a Hezbollah flag - and by Christian Eli and Muslim Ali, two guys who worked as bodyguards for a Western diplomat assigned to Beirut. They had been close friends and workmates for more than 20 years.

While their boss held a meeting in the VIP room of a fashionable East Beirut cafe, Eli, Ali and I struck up a conversation over espresso (on the house, because their boss was a regular and they were on the job) and *éclair*s that they dug into after jokingly patting their gently protruding *embonpoints*. Ali told me that he was planning to emigrate soon, but Eli hastened to explain that his friend was leaving Lebanon so his children would have more economic opportunities – not because he was afraid the civil war would resume. Eli said that he had great hopes for the future of Lebanon. “The bad times are ending,” he said in a hopeful tone. Both men regaled me with fascinating stories about working as bodyguards for foreign diplomat during the civil war – about the day the U.S. Marines’ barracks was hit by a suicide bomber, and about crossing the deserted, bombed out downtown area that divided the east and west sides of the city. Jerking his thumb in the direction of the now rebuilt downtown, Eli asked rhetorically, “Do you know why they used to call it the Green Line?” I shook my head and waited for the punch line. “Because it was so deserted that grass grew over everything, so from the air it looked green,” he answered, grinning delightedly at his joke. Suddenly he touched the listening device in his ear and spoke rapidly into his shirt cuff. His boss’s meeting was over; he and Ali had to leave. Eli wrote his mobile phone number in my notebook and told me that I should not hesitate to call if I needed anything. One second after he walked out the door he popped his head back in and, blushing slightly, said, “Listen, if you quote me, please make sure you don’t mention my family name.”

WANDERING THE CITY

Everywhere I looked, all over Beirut, even on the quietest residential side streets, I saw buildings that were scarred with bullet holes and shrapnel from the street battles of the 1975-1990 civil war. Looking at the people sitting on their balconies as they sipped their morning coffee or walked back from the corner store carrying milk and bread, it was difficult to imagine that those streets were the scenes of battles between warring militias. But it was obvious that the residents did not find it difficult to forget the past: many walls in East Beirut were plastered with posters of Bashir Gemayel, the prime minister and Phalange party leader who was assassinated in 1982, and his nephew Pierre Gemayel, who was assassinated just a few months ago. In West Beirut, the posters were of assassinated Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his son, Saad. And in some neighborhoods pictures of turbaned Shi’a leaders and Hezbollah flags competed for wall space with Lebanese flags and posters of the Hariris. When I asked one acquaintance why so little of the war damage had been repaired, he rolled his eyes at me and said patiently, “Because there is no money.” But there are new buildings going up all over the city, I pointed out. Yes, he answered, but that is not local money. It’s Gulf money.

On my first day in town, over an excellent espresso at a quiet café with free wireless, I sent emails from my laptop to a few people I knew via the Internet, but had never met. I wrote that I was in Beirut, that I would love to meet them but would understand completely if they did not feel safe doing so. One replied immediately in the affirmative, but another responded that, while he would like to meet me, he did not think we were in the appropriate place or time for a meeting.

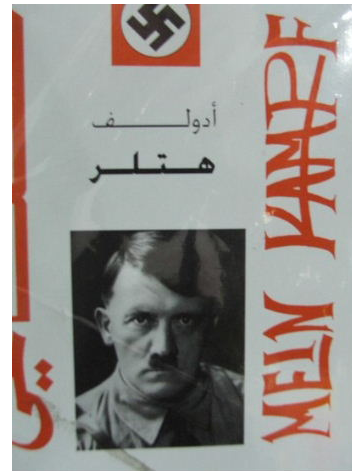
Over the next few days I explored the city on foot, hailing taxis to travel from neighborhood to neighborhood. I was impressed by the chic shops in Hamra and Achrafiyeh, and by the trendy boutiques and laid-back atmosphere in Gemmayzeh. I was amused when I heard well-heeled Achrafiyeh mothers scold their children in a mixture of French and Arabic (“Nicolas! Ca suffit! Khaslas!”) and excited to discover the wonderful bookshops.

I spent some blissful hours browsing at the Virgin Megastore bookshop near Martyr’s Square, at Librairie Orientale on Hamra Road, and at Librairie Antoine at

ABC Achrafiyeh. If I could find similar bookshops in Tel Aviv, with a wide selection of contemporary titles in French, English and Arabic and knowledgeable, multi-lingual staff, I would cry with joy. In Israel, the duopoly of chain bookshops are badly stocked, shockingly overpriced and staffed by grumpy salespeople who tend to answer queries about various titles with a jerk of the thumb toward a shelf and the helpful information that if I can't find the book on the shelves, they don't have it. But when I asked at Librairie Antoine about contemporary novels in Arabic by Iraqi authors, a gift I'd promised to an Arabic-speaking friend in Israel, one of the staff members spent half an hour searching online catalogues and shelves, then volunteered to translate the plot summaries into English.

I was also interested to see that there were many books – fiction and non – by Israelis. At bookshops in Amman the books about Israel seemed selected to present a rabidly anti-Israel view, with conspiracy theories by unknown “academics” and pro-Hezbollah books front and center. But the books I saw in Beirut gave a much more diverse, thoughtful, perspective. That impression was brought home when I compared the books for sale at Beirut's airport with those at Amman's airport. While browsing before my flight at the Virgin bookshop at Rafik Hariri Airport, I saw Linda Grant's *People on the Street*, a collection of anecdotes about the six months she lived in Tel Aviv, next to Samir El-Youssef's latest novel, *The Illusion of Return*. Samir El-Youssef grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon, but he lives today in London, where he is a neighbor and close friend of Linda Grant's, to whom he dedicated *Illusion of Return*. But at Queen Alia Airport, the first book I saw, prominently displayed, was *Mein Kampf* in Arabic.

As I walked around Beirut, I could not help making comparisons to Tel Aviv. There were indeed many remarkable similarities – the attractive people, the café culture, the beachfront promenade, the stylish restaurants, bars and boutiques. Beirut and Tel Aviv also felt very similar: Both are secular, dynamic, creative, and distinctly Levantine, and both are 24-hour cities. The cities also share a borderline anarchic attitude: parking rules are for suckers, unless there's a fine involved; no smoking signs are obeyed



only if the café owner or taxi driver really insists; traffic lights are suggestions rather than directives; and life is for living today so why save money when you never know if there's going to be a bombing or a war tomorrow?

There were also many differences that caught my attention. Leaving aside the political issues for a moment, I couldn't help noticing the disparity in attitudes toward physical appearance. Young Tel Avivians cultivate a trendy look, but they don't tend to invest much in expensive labels or grooming. And while they are beautiful when they are young, they do not tend to age well; badly dyed hair, sun-damaged skin and expanded girth are the norm. Beirutis seemed to have a marked preference for expensive labels, and good grooming was obviously deemed important enough to merit some financial investment. Many middle class Beirut women “of a certain age” were impressively elegant and well maintained – possibly with the help of the occasional nip/tuck.

Once, while wandering around one of the less-prosperous areas, I came across a war-damaged, abandoned shell of a building that was clearly once a synagogue. I lifted my camera to photograph the Star of David pattern of the windows, and just managed to take a few shots before a middle-aged woman dressed in the traditional Shi'a woman's black robe and veil started to yell questions at me in Arabic. I smiled weakly and walked away as quickly as I could without appearing to run.

A few hundred meters away I came to a church, where a wedding had just taken place. Clearly, this was a society wedding for well-connected people. The glamorous, sleekly tanned bridal party stood outside the church, look-

ing as if they were posing for a French fashion magazine, as the photographer immortalized the occasion. Meanwhile, fit-looking security guards wearing black suits and sunglasses stood near Mercedes limousines with dark windows and muttered into the communication devices on their wrists. When the bridal party departed, they were accompanied by police cars and blaring sirens.

And I met a Dutch reporter named Hans who took me for drinks at La Plage, a rather exclusive outdoor bar on the corniche. Lounging on a comfortable couch, beer in hand, I surveyed the elegant women greeting each other with air kisses and watched as Hans followed the sexy hostess wearing the barely-there strapless black mini-dress with his eyes. I grinned and said, “Wow, Hans, the life of a war correspondent is really tough, huh?” He grinned back, and then he told me about his experiences reporting from southern Lebanon during the war last summer – including what he saw in Qana. I recommend clicking on that link; it’s a good example of solid, unemotional reporting – a welcome contrast to this kind of reporting about the same incident. So, for those of you who are eager to hear about the notorious Green Helmet Man and the press scrum at Qana, this is what I heard from Hans.

Apparently Hezbollah kept the press away from the site of the bombing for several hours, so when the reporters were finally allowed in there was a huge media crush (a prize-winning photo, worth a thousand words, here), with photographers and cameramen jostling and yelling at Green Helmet Man to allow them a better view. Apparently GHM grew so frustrated from all the pushing and yelling that he reached into the wreckage, pulled out the corpse of a child, held it up for the press to see and screamed, “Here’s your body!” There was no evidence of rocket launchers in or around the building that was hit, but Hans did accidentally come across some camouflaged mobile rocket launchers at the edge of the village. Some Hezbollah guys caught him eyeing the launchers and told him to leave the area.

Hans went to the local hospital, spoke to the administrator and confirmed that the morgue had received 27 bodies from Qana. Meanwhile, several major media outlets were reporting 60 dead. Hans called his edi-

tor in the Netherlands and told him to inform his colleagues that the number they were reporting was incorrect. He had the name and contact number of the hospital administrator for verification purposes. Hans’s editor said, “But the wire services are reporting 60 dead!” (insert cynical laugh). To which Hans replied that he was sitting in the same restaurant in Tyre with all the wire services reporters, that he could tell his editor what they were eating for dinner, and he also knew who had checked the number at the hospital and who had not. At least one major European television news station received Hans’s information the same day, but waited more than two days to make the correction.

My thoughts on the matter are as follows: 27 dead is 27 too many – that should go without saying; Qana struck an emotional chord because of the tragic precedent in 1996; and in the end, it’s not about “war sucks” or “the media was manipulated,” but rather about why this particular bombing aroused such passionate reactions – whereas the accidental killing of around a dozen migrant Syrian fruit pickers during a bombing of the Bekaa region received little attention. All modern warfare results in the killing of civilians. Are some civilians more equal than others? And if so, why?

ON BEING AN ISRAELI IN BEIRUT

Hans was one of the few people in Beirut who knew I was Israeli, but he was not the only one. On the second night of my visit I met an ex-pat acquaintance and some of her Lebanese friends at a trendy bar in Gemmayzeh. They all spoke flawless English, with the occasional phrase in French or Arabic thrown in. They had French names, and they looked like suntanned, stylish young Parisians who’d just returned from a holiday on the Riviera. They all worked hard and they did not earn much, but they had style. When someone suggested a fourth round of drinks I, already a bit drunk, laughed and blurted out, “Not me, I’m Jewish. Jews are terrible drinkers.” Everyone laughed in response, but no-one asked me any questions. Either they were too tipsy to notice what I’d said, or they thought it perfectly natural to hang out with a Jew at a bar in Beirut.

Then I noticed that one of them, a guy named Pierre (not his real name), was looking at me attentively. Apropos of nothing, he mentioned that his father had visited Jerusalem in the early 1970's, and that he (Pierre) wished he could visit Israel. So I knew he'd guessed my secret. And clearly, he did not mind. We exchanged e-mail addresses and talked about meeting again.

My ex-pat friend's apartment was near my hotel; since both were close to Gemmayzeh, we turned down Pierre's offer of a ride and started to walk home. The streets were quite empty, which was unusual given that it was just past midnight and this was the heart of the nightlife area. But we were also very close to the Hezbollah protest camp, which created an intimidating presence and nearly killed the nightlife. A politician had been assassinated with a car bomb just a few weeks earlier, and there were army checkpoints all over the city. Beirut was tense, and a lot of people were staying home. The tourists were staying away completely, to the despair of the local merchants. My ex-pat friend kept repeating that under normal circumstances the streets of Gemmayzeh were so crowded at night that the pedestrian traffic spilled off the sidewalks onto the road, and traffic was bumper-to-bumper. But that night we walked down the middle of the road just because we could. There were no cars.

Outside yet another bar, I saw a moped adorned with a sticker that said "no war." Below that was another sticker, with a slogan in white Arabic script on a red background. My ex-pat friend translated the slogan for me, "Life is better without politics." The door to the bar swung open, and a curly-haired young woman wearing a strapless camisole, who told us to call her Bee, asked us with a smile why I was photographing the moped. It turned out that it belonged to her boyfriend, as did the bar, and that he had created the "life is better without politics" campaign. They invited us in for shots, and the boyfriend told us that his family was pushing him to leave Lebanon and look for a better future abroad, but he didn't want to leave Beirut because he

knew he'd never be happy living in another city. At their suggestion we proceeded together to another bar, a late-night spot that was owned by a guy named Kamal who'd moved more than a decade previously to Beirut, from his native Belize. More beer, more shots. In response to her question I told Bee, who was a university student, that I was a journalist.

"Are you going to write about Lebanon?" she asked. "I think so," I answered. "Then you have to dig deeper than the other journalists!" she said, before launching into a lecture about how inaccurately Lebanon was portrayed in the foreign media. Her litany was remarkably similar to the complaints of Israelis about the way the foreign media portrayed their country.

Bee, who said she was born in Saudi Arabia but had lived in Beirut since she was a child, recommended a book on the Hezbollah, which she said was misunderstood, and described her outrage at a New York Times article that had portrayed young middle class Beirut women as obsessed with finding a rich husband. When she asked whether I planned to visit the south, I hesitated and said I wasn't sure, and asked if she had been to the south. "Not for years," she answered. "I went down with my family after the [Israeli] occupation ended, but not since then. The south feels like a different country. I feel as though I've left Lebanon when I go down there." Suddenly she got tired of politics, turned to her rather taciturn boyfriend and stuck her tongue down his throat. They left soon afterward, without saying goodbye.

The next morning, I woke up with the horrendous hangover I mentioned above, in the description of my meeting with Najib. Not wanting to waste an entire morning recovering, I took my heaving stomach and my laptop to Café de Prague, a cozy student hangout near the American University of Beirut. Three espressos and a liter of water later, I was in the middle of responding to an email when one of the virtual Lebanese acquaintances who had, to my regret, declined an opportunity to meet me, suddenly popped up on my messenger. "Where are you?" he typed. "Café de Prague," I answered. "The coffee is better at X Café," he responded, naming a place in a neighborhood on the other side of Beirut. "And how long will the coffee be good at that café?" I asked.

“You’re smart,” he answered. So I gathered up my things to go and meet my mysterious virtual friend on the other side of Beirut.

He was waiting for me at the entrance to the café. “Hi,” he said briskly. “I’m Joseph (not his real name). I’d better not tell you my family name – it’s for your own good as well as mine. We’re quite well known. By the way, if you have a mobile phone would you mind turning it off? It could be used as a tracking device.” Despite the John le Carre dialogue, Joseph was a gentle guy who made me feel very comfortable. He took me on a lovely tour of the towns in the mountains just north of Beirut. We went to the ancient port town of Byblos, to Jounieh, Zouk, Nahr el Kalb and the cathedral town of Harissa. The scenery was stunningly beautiful, and Joseph was an excellent tour guide. At one point he showed me the Jounieh Bridge that was bombed by the IAF last summer. Repairs were still ongoing, and I stood on a cliff overlooking the bridge as I watched workmen pouring concrete. It was a strange feeling to be hosted by a friendly Lebanese while looking at the damage my country’s air force caused to his country last year. Joseph said that the cost of the repairs was absorbed by the casino owners of Jounieh; the government would have taken at least three years to finish the job, and the casino owners didn’t want their patrons to stay away due to traffic jams on the narrow alternate road.

On more than one occasion, Lebanese acquaintances in Beirut who knew I was Israeli asked me why the Israeli Air Force had bombed certain targets that were not in Hezbollah-controlled areas, as if I were somehow privy to information about Israeli military strategy. Why had they hit Jounieh Bridge, the LBC broadcasting facilities, the airport, the milk factory, the port? Did I know that they hadn’t had fresh milk for six months after the war? Why was Israel bombing their infrastructure when they were trying so hard to recover from the civil war and deal with the Syrians and the Hezbollah as well? These were people who felt that Hezbollah posed as much of a threat to them as it did to Israel. It would be a huge stretch (i.e., wrong) to extrapolate that they were pro-Israel, but in a way they thought they had a common cause with Israel when it came to the Party



of God, and they seemed to take the bombings outside of the Hezbollah areas very personally – as if Israel had betrayed them.

Some people who were not Hezbollah supporters told me they were nevertheless on the fence about enforcement of UN Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarmament of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. “It’s complicated,” explained one middle-class, secular Sunni. “I don’t like Hezbollah, but I’m sure Israel will attack us again. If Hezbollah disarms, who will fight back?” This particular guy did not know I was Israeli, so I did not want to expose myself by debating that point with him, but I thought it was interesting that he was absolutely convinced Israel posed a military threat to Lebanon. To bolster his point, he mentioned the frequent IAF flyovers that broke the sound barrier. It was interesting to see how similar the Israeli and Lebanese narratives of the conflict could be: The average Israeli will tell you that we’re just sitting here trying to live our lives in peace while Hezbollah threatens our northern border for no reason, and that if they would just leave us alone we’d be able to make peace with Lebanon tomorrow; meanwhile, a lot of average Lebanese seemed to feel they were just trying to live their lives and rehabilitate their country, while Israel was threatening their southern border for no reason. This reminded me of how many times I had heard both Israelis and Palestinians express the exact same phrase about the other: “They only understand force.”

As Joseph and I were leaving Byblos, we came across a group of Lebanese Scouts who were passing out leaflets to passing motorists. Joseph stopped, thinking initially

that the kids were out in support of the army, but it turned out the leaflets were part of an anti-drug campaign mounted by Jeunesse Anti Drogue (JAD), or Youth Against Drugs.

In response to the battle between the Lebanese Army and Fatah el Islam in Nahr el Bard, a couple of advertising firms put together a campaign in support of the army. There were billboards along the highway that showed the Lebanese flag with army camouflage replacing the green of the cedar tree, photos of determined-looking soldiers, and even a video clip of a soldier walking on Hamra Road and smiling as people stop spontaneously to salute him. One acquaintance told me that none of the people who appear in the clip is a professional actor, and all volunteered their time for the project.

Given all the political divisions in Lebanon, the battle between the army and foreign militant Islamists was, for many, a unifying issue that everyone could rally around. Well, not quite everyone. Someone told me, rather heatedly, that on the day most Lebanese television stations opened their news broadcasts with reports that 11 soldiers had been killed in Nahr el Bard, Hezbollah's Al Manar television opened with a story about a battle in Afghanistan.

Like Tel Aviv, Beirut seemed to be a city that worked because its residents wanted it to work – and so it did, despite incompetent politicians and bad governance (just like in Israel). The city was experiencing a building boom. Just a few hundred feet away from the Hezbollah protest camp in the center of downtown, construction cranes revolved at the top of gleaming glass towers. Huge signs advertised luxury apartments for sale and office space for rent. A Megastore overlooked Martyr's Square, which was surrounded by army checkpoints. When I asked one Lebanese acquaintance, who was preparing to move abroad in search of economic opportunity, about the cognitive dissonance between the political and economic crises and the building boom, which seemed to be mostly financed by foreign investors, he nodded and answered, "That is why

there is a big question mark over the future of Beirut."

Political stalemate and whispers of imminent civil war co-existed with foreign investment and exclusive shopping malls. In the nearly deserted downtown core, expensively groomed businessmen clad in Armani suits and designer sunglasses walked briskly past the sullen Hezbollah supporters who had been occupying their protest camp for more than six months. I understood the contempt and anger expressed by middle class Beirutis regarding the Hezbollah camp that had destroyed the economic life downtown; I would have felt the same way, if I had been in their place. But looking at the resentful stares of the grubby Hezbollah guys patrolling the perimeter of the dusty tent camp in the blazing sun, I also saw what seemed, through the eyes of an outsider, like more of a class conflict than a political protest. When the call to prayer sounded from the Hariri Mosque, none of them made a move to pray. So it seemed pretty clear that their loyalty to Hezbollah was not based on its religious message.

Having heard so much about this protest camp, I wanted to see it for myself. A couple of people told me that the protestors were paid \$650 per month to occupy the tents – a considerable amount in a country where an entry-level salary for a university graduate was about \$500 per month. I had also heard many mournful accounts of how the Hezbollah tent camp had turned the downtown core, which had been expensively restored under Rafik Hariri, into a ghost town.

I wandered around the tent camp, trying to look as much like a stupid tourist as possible, attempting to assess the meaning of this place. Most of the tents were empty. One of them contained a ping-pong table. Here and there I saw one or two men lying on mattresses, swatting away the occasional fly and trying to sleep through the mid-day heat. Angry looking young men, wearing grimy T-shirts and ill-fitting, unfashionable jeans, sat around the perimeter of the camp holding walkie talkies and looking suspiciously at passersby. I tried to take a photo, but a couple of the walkie talkie boys stood up abruptly and started to walk toward me when they saw my camera, so I tucked it back into my purse and walked toward the army checkpoint at the entrance to the downtown core. Lebanese army soldiers and Hezbollah security guys stood meters apart, studiously ignoring one another in a

stony stalemate.

Café owners smiled at me hopefully as I passed row upon row of empty chairs. Most of the shops were no longer open for business. The few that were open had no customers. The streets were so quiet that I could hear an echo bouncing off the walls of the closely placed buildings. The call for prayer went out from the muezzin at the new Hariri Mosque, and was immediately drowned out by church bells. It was a depressing place: the refurbished downtown, normally a major tourist magnet, was supposed to symbolize an end to Lebanon's internecine conflict; but its current state belied the promise.

So I went to find the famous Magen Abraham Synagogue, which is about ten minutes' walk from downtown. Once it was the most important place of worship for Beirut's Jewish community. But there were no openly identified Jews in Beirut anymore, although I heard rumors of a small, wealthy community living as Christians in the Jounieh area. The synagogue, which had been badly damaged in 1982, was abandoned.

I'd been warned that asking directions to the synagogue would arouse suspicion. "It's near the Audi Bank," said one acquaintance. "Just ask for the Audi bank, and you'll find the synagogue." I found it. The Magen Abraham synagogue was a mournful, nearly destroyed structure that looked completely out of place in that area of office towers, parking lots and refurbished green parks. A rough wooden fence and a padlocked gate surrounded the perimeter. The roof was nearly gone. Peeking through a crack in the fence, I saw that the entrance was completely covered in overgrown weeds. I was so fascinated by the synagogue, and so proud of myself for finding it despite my nearly non-existent sense of direction, that I failed to notice that the area was not completely deserted. Until I tried to take a photograph.

Suddenly a uniformed security guard appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and told me I wasn't allowed to take photos. I pointed at the synagogue, told him I was an architecture student, and asked if I could take just one photograph. He assented. So I took two photographs, although they look exactly the same.

Hot and sweaty from the mid-day heat, I purchased a bottle of mineral water at a dusty little grocery store nearby, and went to sit under a tree for a few minutes. Suddenly, three men with overdeveloped upper bodies, wearing reflective aviator glasses and laminated identification cards hung from lanyards around their necks, roared toward me on their motorcycles. They approached the uniformed security guard, pointed at me and exchanged a few words. The one whose body most resembled Arnold Schwarzenegger's in his prime walked over to me. "English? French? Arabic?" he asked. "English or French," I answered. "Listen," he said in English. "I am telling you this for your own good. It's very dangerous here. The whole area is a military zone, and we are expecting trouble."

I looked at the quiet green park, the abandoned synagogue and the parking lot, looked back at him in puzzlement, and said, "Sorry, I didn't realize. I was just resting because it's so hot, and I was interested in that building over there." I pointed at the synagogue, and mentioned that the security guard had given me his permission to take a photograph. Schwarzenegger followed my pointing finger and said, "Oh, the Jewish building? I'm sorry, it's all locked up. You can't go inside." I waited for him to ask me why I was interested in the "Jewish building," but he didn't. He just wished me a pleasant day and told me to be careful. I looked around at the innocuous downtown scene, and wondered again at the constant clash of normalcy and danger in Beirut.

When I told that story to an Israeli friend, a journalist that I often see when we are both reporting on the same events in the West Bank, he asked me teasingly what I would have done if an Israeli soldier had told me to leave an ostensibly civilian area with the claim that it was a closed military zone. I told him I would have argued with the soldier, told him to show me the order or give me the name and mobile number of his officer – which is what most Israeli reporters do in those situations, and my friend knew what my answer to his question would be. But when one is a clandestine visitor from Israel in Lebanon, one obeys the rules. And besides, Schwarzenegger was very polite.

That night, Pierre took me out for dinner at a restaurant in a mountain town north of Beirut. As we were



driving, I told him the story of my visit to the tent camp and the synagogue. “Listen,” he said, “You are crazy. Don’t go to those places! It’s really not safe and you could get into trouble. You’ve been lucky so far, but don’t push it.” As we approached yet another army checkpoint, he said, “Do me a favor: if they ask you for identification, don’t show them your Israeli passport, okay?”

Over hummus, arak, and more assorted mezze (Middle Eastern appetizers) than we could possibly consume, Pierre and I talked for a long time about what we had seen and experienced during the war last summer. He had worked in southern Lebanon as a producer for a foreign correspondent, while I had worked in northern Israel for a European correspondent, so we spent a lot of time exchanging stories. For me, that evening represented emotional closure. I was sitting in a restaurant overlooking the mountains of Lebanon, surrounded by middle class families enjoying good food, nargilehs and fresh mountain air, and having a rational, detached conversation about the war with a Lebanese man who knew I was Israeli. We both saw the war in pretty cynical terms and we told each other what a relief it was to find someone who felt the same way. I told him about a time during the war when I stuck my foot under the Israeli-Lebanese border fence in Metulla (and blogged about the experience). “So this is not exactly the first time I’ve been inside Lebanon,” I teased.

Pierre was planning to leave Lebanon. He had found a job abroad, and was happy for the opportunity because, he said, he would be able to help his family. Like so many middle class Lebanese,

they were struggling financially.

Toward the middle of the week, the nightlife suddenly started to pick up. People were out on the streets of Gemmayzeh again. An ex-pat friend took me for a whirlwind tour of some of the major hot spots one night: I had already visited the Sky Bar, a huge outdoor bar perched on the top of a new high-rise building. It was packed with Beirut’s “Young and Restless, Bold and Beautiful,” but was a bit over the top for my taste.

But that night we went to Club Social, which, with its live music, pool table and lounge bar atmosphere, was more my style. After stopping in at a few more places around Gemmayzeh, a few of us ended the night sitting on a bench on the seaside corniche, facing the Mediterranean breeze and breathing in the humid night air as we drank bottled beer purchased from an all-night kiosk, enjoying a light conversation that could have taken place anywhere in the world. But it was Beirut, and one of our group was a Syrian – who knew I was Israeli, and really did not care at all. He asked me, though, to be careful never to mention his name or publish any photographs I had taken of him.

That night I dreamed that I was arrested at Rafik Hariri Airport before I could board my flight to Amman.

On my final night in Beirut I ate what will surely remain one of the most remarkable meals of my life, at an Armenian restaurant called Mayrig. I am still dreaming of the silky hummus with spicy Armenian sausage, the Armenian tabouleh, the little savory cheese pastries and the lamb cooked with sour cherries. When I told a Lebanese friend who lives in Dubai about that restaurant, he immediately said, “Best restaurant in the Middle East. Possibly the world. I eat there every time I visit Beirut.” When I think of all the reasons I regret not being able to return to Beirut, I think first of that wonderful restaurant.

I left Beirut with mixed feelings. If I weren’t Israeli, I could easily imagine myself spending a few months there. But having to worry about my little secret being exposed was not easy. It limited me. I did not feel comfortable accepting hospitality from strangers, in case they found out after I left that I was Israeli and felt betrayed. I was constantly having to avoid photographing people, lest they be accused of associating illegally with an Israeli, and I often avoided taking photos of street scenes because I was concerned about being questioned. I had to avoid

dahiyeh and southern Lebanon, and I never knew when a putative friend might turn out to be a foe. I did not like lying to people when they asked me where I lived. And I did not like the knowledge that I was welcome as Lisa, the Canadian; but not as Lisa, the Israeli.

During the short flight from Beirut to Amman, I sat next to a young Jordanian woman who was an architect based in the Gulf region. She was a child of privilege – raised in one of Amman’s most exclusive areas, and educated at an elite American university. “So,” she asked after we’d chatted for a few minutes, “Where are you from?” I peered out the window and asked her, “Are we out of Lebanese air space yet?” “Yes,” she answered. “We’re in Jordan.”

“I’m Israeli,” I said.

And for the first time in a week, I was able to take a deep, cleansing breath.

Postscript: I decided against publishing this article in a mainstream media forum, for lots of different reasons that are not really important. The thing is, I’ve given up on the opportunity to be paid for the piece. I really enjoyed writing this article, but I also worked very hard on it. So. *ahem* (this feels strange). If you enjoyed reading the article, you think it’s something you would be willing to pay for and you are in a position to make a contribution, I would be very grateful for your support. Just scroll to the top of the page, and on the upper right corner (on the sidebar), you will find a blue button labeled “becoming a sustaining contributor.” Just click on it, and follow the instructions.

Merci. :)