Blood, Smoke and Tears in Beirut

by Andrew Exum **(/experts/andrew-exum)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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BEIRUT -- When we first felt the blast, my girlfriend and I were walking down Hamra Street in West Beirut toward the American University. Tara had flown in from New York City just a few hours earlier on Monday, and I was showing her around the city for the first time.

At first, it was difficult to tell what exactly the noise was -- the sonic boom of an Israeli jet perhaps, or maybe detonations from a nearby construction site -- but then, as our bodies shook and windows shattered, it was clear that it was something much more serious. I looked up to see a tall column of black smoke rising from the Corniche, Beirut's waterfront avenue, just down the hill.

I had seen similar explosions before -- I was an Army Ranger captain in Iraq last year, before leaving the military to start graduate school here. Tara, a photographer, had her camera with her, and we followed the crowd in the direction of the smoke. As we descended toward the Mediterranean, we began to see more broken glass, entire storefronts demolished, the first traces of blood on the streets.

When we arrived at the site of the blast, in front of the St. George Hotel, at least 10 cars were still burning and a large fire raged inside the shell of the hotel. The St. George is a Beirut landmark, ruined during the civil war and, until Monday, being slowly rebuilt. Firefighters and police officers worked to keep back the crowd, then soldiers slowly began to pour in.

Hundreds of young Arab men crowded around the site, only to beat a quick retreat as the gas tanks in the burning cars caught fire, setting off a series of secondary explosions. Tara and I took refuge behind a car that had been crushed by the explosion but had not caught fire. From there we could see the parking attendant at the St. George, a middle-aged man, sitting in his little booth, watching the scene unfolding no more than 75 yards away with a look of curiosity and resignation.

The difference in reaction between the younger and older Beirutis was striking. The soldiers and police officers, most looking to be in their early 20's, seemed scared and unsure of what to do. Some tried to impose order by shouting for the crowds to get back; others just wandered around looking as devastated as the civilians they sought to restrain. These men were all born too late to remember the civil war, so for many this was their first taste of real violence.

Not so for the older Lebanese. One elderly man walked nonchalantly through the blast site, looking as if he had seen all of this in another life, before stopping to wash his face at a broken water main. Two businessmen in suits stood closer, right next to the crater, sunglasses on their expressionless faces, talking back and forth in quiet, unsurprised

voices.

As a former soldier, I couldn't help but marvel for a moment at the audacity of the attack and the meticulous planning involved. The Corniche at this point takes a sharp turn, forcing cars to slow. The men who placed the bomb surely knew this. In addition, the building across from the St. George was also under construction and uninhabited, so any collateral damage to civilians would have been minimal. Further down the Corniche, the road is wider and would have been choked with pedestrians. Whoever planned this attack had been calculating as well as ruthless.

Also, very well supported. Tara and I climbed up the ruins of the St. George and looked down at the crater. It was easily 25 yards wide and at least three deep. To create a hole this size, you would have to fill a large truck or van with high explosives, first re-enforcing the shock absorbers to accommodate all the extra weight.

Eventually Tara and I made our way back to the American University. I stopped and talked to a professor, an older Beiruti who had lived in Lebanon throughout the civil war. His face betrayed his sadness, the feeling that the big loser in all of this would be, once again, the Lebanese people.

Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister who was one of those killed in the attack, was a billionaire, and through his actions in office and his private investment was largely responsible for what has passed as financial stability here. The expensive hotels that line the Corniche are now damaged or unreachable, a powerful blow to the resurgent tourism industry. Every window in the chic new Hotel Monroe was shattered; the same for the historic Phoenicia Intercontinental.

That night, Tara and I had a makeshift Valentine's Day dinner in one of the few restaurants that remained open. Around nine o'clock, we made our way back to my apartment, which is in the same West Beirut neighborhood in which Mr. Hariri had lived. The stores were shuttered, the streets silent, out of respect for the dead.

Then, soon after we walked in the door, a roar came up from the street below. I stepped out onto the terrace and watched as a few hundred young men marched down the street, shouting and chanting, on their way to pay their respects at the Hariri house. The marchers were followed by a parade of drivers, honking their horns and shouting out the window into the night.

Fifteen years after the end of the Lebanese civil war, a long period of relative calm had been shattered. As I ventured out yesterday morning it was into a Beirut in mourning, a populace remembering a leader lost, contemplating a future uncertain.

Andrew Exum is the author of This Man's Army. ❖

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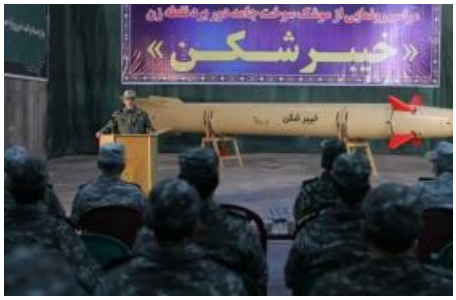

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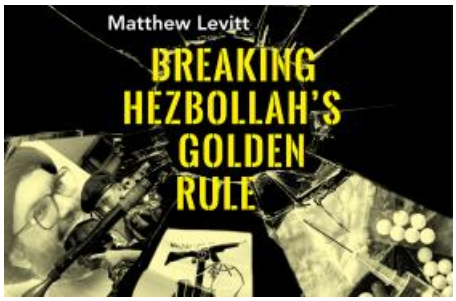

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