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The empire leaves Beirut to burn

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In the year 551, the magnificent, wealthy city of Berytus -- headquarters of the imperial East Mediterranean Roman fleet -- was struck by a massive earthquake. Then, the sea withdrew several miles and the survivors, ancestors of the present-day Lebanese, walked out on the sands to loot the long-sunken merchant ships revealed in front of them.

That was when a tidal wall higher than a tsunami returned to kill them all. So savagely was the old Beirut damaged that the Emperor Justinian sent gold from Constantinople as compensation to every family left alive.

Some cities seem forever doomed. When the Crusaders arrived at Beirut on their way to Jerusalem in the 11th century, they slaughtered everyone in the city. In World War I, Ottoman Beirut suffered a terrible famine; the Turkish army had commandeered all the grain, and the Allied powers blockaded the coast. I still have some ancient postcards I bought here 30 years ago of sticklike children standing in an orphanage, naked and abandoned.

An American woman living in Beirut in 1916 described how she "passed women and children lying by the roadside with closed eyes and ghastly, pale faces. It was a common thing to find people searching the garbage heaps for orange peel, old bones or other refuse, and eating them greedily when found. Everywhere women could be seen seeking eatable weeds among the grass along the roads ... "

How does this happen to Beirut? For 30 years, I've watched this place die and rise from the grave and die again, its apartment blocks pitted with so many bullets they looked like Irish lace.

I lived here through 15 years of civil war that took 150,000 lives, and two Israeli invasions and years of Israeli bombardments that cost the lives of a further 20,000 of its people. I have seen them armless, legless, headless, knifed, bombed and splashed across the walls of houses. Yet they are a fine, educated, moral people whose generosity amazes every foreigner, whose gentleness puts any Westerner to shame, and whose suffering we almost always ignore.

They look like us, the people of Beirut. They have light-colored skin and speak beautiful English and French. They travel the world. Their women are gorgeous and their food exquisite. But what are we saying of their fate today as the Israelis -- in some of their cruelest attacks on this city and the surrounding countryside -- tear them from their homes, bomb them on river bridges, cut them off from food and water and electricity? We say they started this latest war, and we compare their appalling casualties -- 240 in all of Lebanon at the start of last week -- with Israel's 24 dead, as if the figures are the same.

And then, most disgraceful of all, we leave the Lebanese to their fate like a diseased people and spend our time evacuating our precious foreigners while tut-tutting about Israel's "disproportionate" response to the

capture of its soldiers by Hezbollah.

I walked through the deserted city center of Beirut last week and it reminded more than ever of a film lot, a place of dreams too beautiful to last, a phoenix from the ashes of civil war whose plumage was so brightly colored that it blinded its own people. This part of the city -- once a Dresden of ruins -- was rebuilt by Rafiq Hariri, the prime minister who was murdered a mile away last year.

The wreckage of that bomb blast, an awful precursor to the present war in which his inheritance is being vandalized by the Israelis, still stands beside the Mediterranean, waiting for the last U.N. investigator to look for clues.

At the empty Etoile restaurant -- where Hariri once dined with Jacques Chirac -- I sat on the pavement and watched the parliamentary guard still patrolling the facade of the French-built emporium that houses what is left of Lebanon's democracy. So many of these streets were built by Parisians under the French mandate, and they have been exquisitely restored, their mock Arabian doorways bejeweled with marble Roman columns dug from the ancient Via Maxima a few meters away.

Hariri loved this place and, taking Chirac for a beer one day, he caught sight of me sitting at a table. "Ah, Robert, come over here," he roared and turned to Chirac like a cat that was about to eat a canary. "I want to introduce you, Jacques, to the reporter who said I couldn't rebuild Beirut!"

Now it is being unbuilt. The Martyr Rafiq Hariri International Airport has been attacked several times by the Israelis, its glistening halls and shopping malls vibrating to the missiles that thunder into the runways and fuel depots. Hariri's wonderful transnational highway viaduct has been broken by Israeli bombers. Most of his motorway bridges have been destroyed. The Roman-style lighthouse has been smashed by a missile from an Apache helicopter. This small jewel of a restaurant in the center of Beirut has been spared. So far.

It is the slums of Haret Hreik and Ghobeiri and Shiyah that have been leveled and "rubble-ized" and pounded to dust, sending a quarter of a million Shi'ite Muslims to seek sanctuary in schools and abandoned parks across the city. Here, indeed, was the headquarters of Hezbollah, another of those "centers of world terror" that the West keeps discovering in Muslim lands. Here lived Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, the Party of God's leader, a ruthless, caustic, calculating man; and Sayad Mohamed Fadlallah, among the wisest and most eloquent of clerics; and many of Hezbollah's top military planners -- including, no doubt, the men who planned over many months the capture of the two Israeli soldiers 10 days ago.

But did the tens of thousands of poor who live here deserve this act of mass punishment? For a country that boasts of its pinpoint accuracy -- a doubtful notion in any case, but that's not the issue -- what does this act of destruction tell us about Israel? Or about ourselves?

In a modern building in an undamaged part of Beirut, I come, quite by chance, across a well-known and prominent Hezbollah figure, open-neck white shirt, dark suit, clean shoes. "We will go on if we have to for days or weeks or months or ... " And he counts these awful statistics off on the fingers of his left hand. "Believe me, we have bigger surprises still to come for the Israelis -- much bigger, you will see. Then we will get our prisoners and it will take just a few small concessions."

I walk outside, feeling as if I have been beaten over the head. Over the wall opposite there is purple bougainvillea and white jasmine and a swamp of gardenias. The Lebanese love flowers, and Beirut is draped in trees and bushes that smell like paradise.

As for the huddled masses from the bombed-out southern slums of Haret Hreik, I found hundreds yesterday, sitting under trees and lying on the parched grass beside an ancient fountain donated by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul-Hamid. How empires fall.

Across the Mediterranean, two helicopters from the USS Iwo Jima could be seen, heading through the mist and smoke toward the U.S. embassy bunker complex at Awkar to evacuate more citizens of the American Empire. There was not a word from that same empire to help the people lying in the park, to offer them food or medical aid.

Across them all has spread a dark gray smoke that works its way through the entire city, the fires of oil terminals and burning buildings turning into a cocktail of sulphurous air that moves below our doors and through our windows. I smell it when I wake. Half the people of Beirut are coughing in this filth, breathing their own destruction as they contemplate their dead.

The anger that any human soul should feel at such suffering and loss was expressed so well by Lebanon's greatest poet, the mystic Khalil Gibran, when he wrote of the half million Lebanese who died in the 1916 famine, most of them residents of Beirut:

My people died of hunger, and he who

Did not perish from starvation was

Butchered with the sword;

They perished from hunger

In a land rich with milk and honey.

They died because the vipers and

Sons of vipers spat out poison into

The space where the Holy Cedars and

The roses and the jasmine breathe

Their fragrance.

And the sword continues to cut its way through Beirut. When part of an aircraft came streaking out of the sky over the eastern suburbs at the weekend, I raced to the scene to find a partly decapitated driver in his car and three Lebanese soldiers from the army's logistics unit. These are the tough, brave non-combat soldiers of Kfar Chim who have been mending power and water lines these past six days to keep Beirut alive.

I knew one of them. "Hello, Robert. Be quick because I think the Israelis will bomb again, but we'll show you everything we can." And they took me through the fires to show me what they could of the wreckage, standing around to protect me.

A few hours later, the Israelis did come back, as the men of the small logistics unit were going to bed, and they bombed the barracks and killed 10 soldiers, including those three kind men who looked after me amid

the fires of Kfar Chim.

And why? Be sure -- the Israelis know what they are hitting. That's why they killed nine soldiers near Tripoli when they bombed the military radio antennas. But a logistics unit? Men whose sole job was to mend electricity lines? Then it dawns on me. Beirut is to die. It is to be starved of electricity now that the power station in Jiyeh is on fire. No one is to be allowed to keep Beirut alive. So those men had to be liquidated.

Beirutis are tough people and are not easily moved. But at the end of last week, many of them were overcome by a photograph in their daily papers of a small girl, discarded like a broken flower in a field near Ter Harfa, her feet curled up, her hand resting on her torn blue pajamas, her eyes -- beneath long, soft hair -- closed, turned away from the camera. She had been another "terrorist" target of Israel and several people, myself among them, saw a frightening similarity between this picture and the photograph of a Polish girl lying dead in a field beside her weeping sister in 1939.

I go home and flick through my files, old pictures of the Israeli invasion of 1982. There are more photographs of dead children, of broken bridges. Yes, how easily we forget these earlier slaughters. Up to 1,700 Palestinians were butchered at Sabra and Chatila by Israel's proxy Christian militia allies in 1982 while Israeli troops, as they later testified to Israel's own court of inquiry, watched the killings. I stopped counting the corpses when I reached 100. Many of the women had been raped before being knifed or shot.

Yet when I was fleeing the bombing of Ghobeiri with my driver, Abed, a week before last, we swept right past the entrance of the camp, the very spot where I saw the first murdered Palestinians. And we did not think of them. We did not remember them. They were dead in Beirut and we were trying to stay alive in Beirut, as I have been trying to stay alive here for 30 years.

I am back on the seacoast when my mobile phone rings. It is an Israeli woman calling me from the United States, the author of a fine novel about the Palestinians. "Robert, please take care," she says. "I am so, so sorry about what is being done to the Lebanese. It is unforgivable. I pray for the Lebanese people, and the Palestinians, and the Israelis." I thank her for her thoughtfulness and the graceful, generous way she condemned this slaughter.

Then, on my balcony -- a glance to check the location of the Israeli gunboat far out in the sea-smog -- I find older clippings. This is from an English paper in 1840, when Beirut was a great Ottoman city. "Beyrouth" was the dateline. "Anarchy is now the order of the day, our properties and personal safety are endangered, no satisfaction can be obtained, and crimes are committed with impunity. Several Europeans have quitted their houses and suspended their affairs, in order to find protection in more peaceable countries."

On my dining-room wall, I remember, there is a hand-painted lithograph of French troops arriving in Beirut in 1842 to protect the Christian Maronites from the Druze. They are camping in the Jardin des Pins, which will later become the site of the French embassy where, only a few hours ago, I saw French men and women registering for their evacuation. Outside the window, I hear again the whisper of Israeli jets, hidden behind the smoke that drifts 20 miles out to sea.

Fairouz, the most popular Lebanese singer, was to perform at this year's Baalbek festival, cancelled like all Lebanon's festivals. One of her most popular songs is dedicated to her native city:

To Beirut -- peace to Beirut with all my heart

*And kisses -- to the sea and clouds,
To the rock of a city that looks like an old sailor's face.
From the soul of her people she makes wine,
From their sweat, she makes bread and jasmine.
So how did it come to taste of smoke and fire?*

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