

# LEBANON - a sinister calm

Beirut is enjoying a lull in the fighting that has ravaged its citizens' lives intermittently since April 1975, but many Lebanese now fear their country's future may be tied more to Israeli designs than to their own desire for peace. By SUSANNAH TARBUSH, in Beirut.

Superficially, life in west Beirut is recovering its pre-civil war character.

The streets are thronged with pedestrians and jammed with cars. The famous open-air cafes of Hamra street, the traditional scene of political debate, are once again thriving. Despite a nominal censorship, news stands are crowded with a colourful array of Beirut-published newspapers and magazines. From numerous roadside shacks, smuggled cigarettes sell for £Leb 1 (about 30 cents) for 20, and whisky fetches ridiculously low prices. People seem determined to enjoy themselves. Eating out is a major pastime, and despite the opening of several new cinemas recently, it is almost impossible to get a seat on Sunday afternoons.

Many areas of west Beirut show little sign of war damage, although down by the sea some streets are still largely rubble. The gigantic burnt-out hulks of the Holiday Inn and Phoenicia and St. George hotels stand as testimony to the months of battle. The roadblocks of the Arab Deterrent Force are a constant reminder of the abnormality of the situation in Beirut and in Lebanon as a whole, but the force keeps a low profile generally. Lebanese gendarmes are increasingly apparent on the streets as the state makes faltering efforts to establish some authority of its own. There are few leftist militiamen on the streets nowadays, although the Palestinian camps and offices are heavily guarded by guerrillas.

But beneath the apparent calm, west Beirut is waiting. At night, the streets are eerily deserted. The ritual of Syrian-rightist fighting in east Beirut begins after nightfall, echoing through the western part of the city. Sometimes it is limited to a few clatters of firing, at other times shells crash down at regular intervals. So complete is the division of Beirut that, heard from the west, the fighting has a remote, unreal quality. Beirut has shrunk into its two sectors, and people in the western half lament the days when it was still possible to drive northwards along the spectacular twisting coast road past Jounieh and the Lebanese casino up to Tripoli. Jounieh is now the lifeline to what is termed the "rightist heartland", and Israel reportedly makes regular arms deliveries there.

The Palestinian areas of Beirut — the teeming refugee camps of Sabra, Shatila



The shops fill up again

and Burj al-Barajneh and the streets around the Arab University where the offices of PLO institutions and various guerrilla groups are located — tensely await a new Israeli onslaught. Particularly after any Palestinian operation in the occupied territories or within Israel, they and the Palestinian camps near Tyre in the south brace themselves for Israeli bombing raids, shelling from the sea or attacks by assassination squads. There was a sharp upsurge in tension after the blowing up of Fateh security chief Ali Hasan Salama (Abu-Hasan) and four bodyguards by a car bomb in Verdun on 22 January. The PLO implicated Israeli agents using British passports in the assassination, and foreigners suddenly became suspect in the Palestinian areas and liable to be detained for questioning by the PLO. But Beirut has always been notorious for the way in which foreigners are liable to suddenly turn up and then just as suddenly to vanish. It would be hard to prevent fresh Israeli hit-team attacks such as that which killed three Palestinian leaders — Kamal Nasser, Muhammad Yousef Najjar and Kamal Adwan — in Beirut in April 1973, and it is feared that Israel is planning a renewal of such attacks, with Abu-Hasan only the first target.

"We Palestinians must not make the same mistake as the Jews, that of adopting a ghetto mentality," a Palestinian writer told me in a cafe in the Fakehani area past which guerrillas in battle fatigue strolled. "But faced with these threats, what can we do?"

The people of west Beirut are deeply frustrated by the political stagnation in Lebanon, and the government's almost total ineffectiveness. The cabinet has been publicly divided in recent months,

and many people wonder how long Sarkis, often accused of siding with the rightist Lebanese Front, can hold out as president. Meanwhile, a bewildering assortment of armed forces holds sway in Lebanon — "our Lebanese cocktail" as one Lebanese journalist describes it. The cocktail includes the Arab Deterrent Force, rightist militias, Major Saad Haddad's "army" in the south, leftist militias, Palestinian guerrillas, the Lebanese Arab Army with headquarters at Nabatiya, UNIFIL, and with Israeli forces playing their part in support of the rightists in the south. The government's efforts to send troops to southern Lebanon have so far failed, with the halting of a unit of the Lebanese army at Kawkaba by rightist shelling in July.

"The coming phase in Lebanon will be one of increased tension", warned Fawaz Trabulsi, one of the leaders of the Organisation for Communist Action in Lebanon and a major figure in the National Movement. "There will be a new confrontation because of the intimate ties between the Lebanese civil war and Middle East developments. As Lebanon was used by Kissinger as a diversion from the first and second Sinai agreements, it will be used as a diversion from a Begin-Sadat peace treaty. And it is in Lebanon that the forces opposing Sadat and the US are located — notably the Palestinian and Syrians".

The concern with which the situation in Lebanon is being viewed was expressed by the active role taken by the Lebanese National Movement in the recent Palestine National Council (PNC) session in Damascus. The leaders of the National Movement and of the smaller National Front were invited as observers, and

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their place on the platform with Palestinian leaders. A number of them addressed the council, including Taufiq Sultan of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Inaam Raad of the National Syrian Social Party (NSSP), George Hawi of the Lebanese Communist Party and Kamal Shatila, Secretary-General of the Nationalist Front. The national unity programme adopted by the PNC calls for increased consolidation of Palestinian and Lebanese national and progressive forces in defence of Lebanese land and the Palestine revolution".

Inaam Raad told reporters firmly at the PNC that the conflict in Lebanon was not, as it is often portrayed in the western press, a Christian-Muslim or Christian rightist — Muslim leftist conflict. "It is now a struggle between those patriots who love Lebanon and its unity, and the pro-Zionist forces conspiring against Lebanon's unity for predetermined Zionist plans."

As if to underline the urgency of the situation, there was a further escalation of Israeli military activity in the south during the PNC session. Israeli commandos struck at three villages north of the Litani River on 19 January, attacking Palestinian and Lebanese Arab Army positions. Heavy artillery attacks caused an exodus of panic-stricken southerners during the following five days, while rockets were fired from Lebanon into northern Israel.

It is thought in Beirut that this may be the prelude to a stepped up Israeli campaign in the south, and the possibility of a fresh Israeli invasion is not discounted. Many Lebanese believe that Israel is intent on modifying its northern border and creating a buffer zone like those between it and Egypt (Sinai), Jordan (the West Bank) and Syria (Golan). It is suspected that Israel has long cherished the idea of a Christian "statelet" in the south closely allied to Israel which would both aid Israel's security and mean Israel was no longer the only confessionally-based state in the area. Israel is also thought to have designs on the waters of the Litani.

#### UN provides cover to Israeli activity

The National Movement believes that Israel is at present engaged in a game of quietly taking over chunks of southern Lebanon. Trabulsi refers to a string of Shia villages north of Bint Jbail and east of Tyre that used to be protected from Major Haddad and the Israelis by UNIFIL. "With the withdrawal of UNIFIL's main operational French and Iranian troops, these villages have been left to their own fate," he charges. The Israelis present the heads of the villages with threats and demands that there



Down the street, the ADF keep watch

should be no Palestinian or National Movement presence. Haddad's troops then post their own men in the village.

"This is why we have always said the main role of the UN troops has been to give a cover for Israel to carry out at least the minimum of securing its Lebanese border, occupying a good part of southern Lebanon and establishing a local administration under Israeli control," Trabulsi says. The National Movement asserts that Israel is creating the infrastructure for this canton by expanding the old British airport at Khiyam and establishing a port in Iskanderun. The whole rightist-controlled area is now, in addition, criss-crossed by modern military roads to enable swift movement of Israeli troops if necessary.

"Israel also has a policy of demographically changing the area by driving out the Shia, who had formed the majority," Trabulsi further charges. He cites the case of Khiyam and the surrounding villages, none of whose inhabitants are able to return.

The National Movement says that with the withdrawal of the French and Iranian operational UNIFIL troops, the whole role of UNIFIL is being altered. The force is being changed into an observer force that could not withstand a future Israeli military operation. "This is a US-inspired policy," Trabulsi says.

There is a feeling that time is running out in Lebanon. Inaam Raad says "We are calling for the largest possible assembling of forces, irrespective of their social or political status, who are antagonistic to the Zionising of Lebanon". Raad, himself a Roman Catholic, points out that in the leadership and rank and file of the National Movement there are thousands of Christians. He names many prominent Christians who have come out against the rightists, including former president Sulaiman Franjiya, Joseph Skaff and Jean Aziz, deputies of Zahr and of Jezzine respectively, both of Christian towns, former presidential candidate Raymond Edde and Chairman of the Parliamentary Defence Committee Fuad Lahoud.

To the groundswell of opposition to the partition trend in Lebanon can be added many parliamentary deputies, notably those belonging to speaker Karim Assad's Independent Parliamentary Grouping formed last September. While the political stalemate continues and with the state unable to take control of much of Lebanon and apparently unwilling to see the ADF deployed in these areas, it is difficult to see a quick end to the de facto partitioning of Lebanon. For the moment Lebanon waits anxiously to see what the post-Camp David phase of Middle East developments will bring.