



Palestine in Lebanon

A Photo Essay

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Beirut, as is true of many other cities, possesses many faces. It is frustrating for the visitor. He wants to capture them all. But he is unable; not only because he is an outsider, nor because of the limited time at his disposal. Rather it is due to the cultural baggage he brings along with him and which will not allow him - even forbids him - from seeing its myriad faces.

I remarked to friends my surprise at continually discovering new cities within the city, and my amazement at their coexistence and concomitant disconnectedness which - more than in any 'normal' city - is the predominant feature of Beirut. Its people do not live together; they live side by side, ignorant of each other, suspicious, perhaps even fearful, the memories of the not-too-distant war still fresh in their minds.

Palestine alone holds a special place to which all pay homage. I remain suspicious

nevertheless that this is merely verbal. Muslim, Christian, Shiite, Sunni, Druze, leftist, rightist, those who are engaged and those who are apolitical, all partake in this strange rite! But this homage, it becomes rapidly clear, does not extend to the Palestinians themselves.

Everywhere one goes, whether in West Beirut, its Southern Suburb (Al-Dahiya al-Jounibiyeh, the stronghold of Hizballah), Hay al-Sullam (characterised by an acute observer as the quarter populated by 'the impoverished of the impoverished'), or in the border villages of the south that abut Palestine-Israel, Jerusalem is ever present in the shape of monster-sized billboards replicating al-Aqsa, and numerous posters plastering the walls with pictures of old and new Palestinian martyrs. Iraq has not replaced Palestine as the object of primary concern. It has only served to heighten the sense of imminent danger. A warning comes from the wall crowded with faces competing for Beirut's 2004 municipal elections: "Yesterday Palestine... Today Iraq.... And tomorrow????".

But what of the Palestinians themselves? All eyes are fixed on Palestine and on the unfolding events in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank. Sheikh Ahmad Yassin has just been killed, to be followed soon after by Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi. The daily newspapers follow events in detail. Every home razed, every child murdered, every military incursion in the territory of the so-called 'Palestine Authority' is dutifully reported. Everywhere one goes total strangers express admiration and respect for the 'heroic resistance' of the Palestinians in the face of the Israeli military onslaught. On discovering that their interlocutor is from Palestine - from Jerusalem itself - they seem to be asking for some kind of special blessing which only the Palestinian, suffering daily death and injury at the hands



"Kadimoun Ya Quds" - Victory arch in Bint Jbail, southern Lebanon, May 2004. Source: Musa Budeiri.



Roadsign to Palestine, Nakoura Village, southern Lebanon, May 2004. Source: Musa Budeiri.



Roadsign to Tarbikha, Palestine, on Lebanese-Palestinian border, May 2004. Source: Musa Budeiri.



Imam Musa Al-Sadr, Hay al-Sullum, Al-Dahiye al-Jounibiyeh, Beirut, May 2004. Source: Musa Budeiri.



Obituary poster for Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, May 2004. Source: Musa Budeiri.



Rashidiyeh camp and cemetery, Tyre, May 2004. Source: Musa Budeiri.

of an Israeli military machine gone mad, can give.

But Beirut is also a city of Palestinians, and Lebanon is also a country of Palestinians. Indeed, Palestinians and Lebanese are intertwined. The borders that separate Palestine from Lebanon and Lebanon from Palestine did not exist even a hundred years ago. After the occupation by British and French troops and the invention of a border separating South Lebanon from northern Palestine, Haifa remained closer than Beirut to the inhabitants of South Lebanon, and constituted the focus of the region's economic activity. 'Intermarriages', to use today's linguistic fashion linking the choice of life partner to regional national identities, were as commonplace as travelling to seek employment or education.

The events of 1948 closed the borders, but brought large numbers of Palestinians into the country - and not only to the southern cities of Tyre and Sidon, but also to Beirut and Tripoli further north - ensuring the continuity of that special relationship that stretched back to Ottoman times. Palestinians of all shapes and colours were to be found in Beirut, from the founder of Intra Bank Yusuf Baidas to Ibrahim Abu Dayyeh, who commanded the irregulars that defended the Qatamon Quarter of Jerusalem in 1948 and ended up a war invalid paralysed in a wheelchair. The foremost name which comes to mind is that of Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the leader of the Palestinian national movement in the 1930s and 40s, who spent the last two decades of his life in Lebanon and was buried in Beirut. Nineteen-eighty-two changed everything. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the expulsion of the PLO from Beirut, the election of Bashir Jmayel as president, the continued deployment of Syrian troops in the country, the continuation of the civil war even in the absence of an active Palestinian component, the appearance of the Shiites on

centre stage as a power in their own right are, among other factors, all the source of an historical amnesia.

But just as I began by asserting that there are many Beiruts, it is also a fact that there are many Lebanons; none has succeeded in asserting itself vis-a-vis the others and the country's history has been, 'til now, a search for identity. Palestinians, having become part of the 'Lebanese equation' prior to 1982, and having lost what power they accumulated as a result of their defeat to Israel that summer (one could also talk in the same breath of Syria's success), have been the main losers in the war that began in 1975 and is yet to be concluded. Indeed, perhaps I speak only of the Lebanese-Palestinian relationship within only one of the many Lebanons that has existed.

In March and April, the walls of West Beirut were plastered with hundreds of pictures of Sheikh Yassin and Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi; these walls have seen perhaps thousands of pictures of other Palestinians and Lebanese fallen in the long march since 1948. The same pictures could also be seen in Burj al-Barajneh camp in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and in Bourj al-Shamali and Rashidiyeh camps in Tyre, and likely in all of the other Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon that I was unable to visit.

In South Lebanon, on the other hand, the roadsides were covered with pictures of Hizballah martyrs who died while fighting for the liberation of the south. But they were fighting for even more than that. At the entrance of Bint Jbail, a stronghold of Hizballah, which proudly proclaims itself as "the Capital of Liberation" a victory arch is emblazoned "Kadimouna Ya Quds" ["Jerusalem, We Are Coming"]. In the poorest of Beirut's suburbs, Hay al-Sullam, an Amal poster portrays the image of Imam Musa al-Sadr and the promise that "the honour of Jerusalem will only be liberated

at the hands of honest believers".

Conspicuously, Palestinian faces are absent here. Only Fathi Shikaki is free to roam. His image stands right at the border facing Palestine, not far from Yareen. He is smiling, and he is actually within eyesight of Upper Galilee. To enter Rashidiyeh refugee camp on the road leaving the city of Sur (Tyre) towards Palestine, one must pass a Lebanese army roadblock situated at the entrance of the camp. Immediately inside the camp, armed Palestinians man their own checkpoints.

The dusty alleys of Rashidiyeh lead to the beach, and to the cemetery. In the midst of the burial ground is a martyr's memorial whose inscription says was built in 1986 and restored in January 1998. I wander around the graveyard and read other inscriptions. Two catch my attention. The first has the name of Sheikh Ismail Saleh al-As'ad from the village of Fara near Safad, born 1890, died 15 November 1984.

The second inscription reads, "The tomb of the martyr Mohammad Ali Dyab, born in 1965, from Tarshiha, and martyred on 5 June 1982". A couple of days after my visit to the cemetery at Rashidiyeh, I read in the pages of *al-Safir* on the 12th of June 2004 that the remains of two fighters have been found in Beaufort Castle (Arnoun). The first are those of a Yemenite volunteer, Mohammad Abu Saleh, and the second, of Ya'koub Abdul Hafiz al-Samour, the commander of the military post and an officer in Fateh. Both were killed while resisting the Israeli invasion in June 1982. Both were buried with full military honours in Ein al-Hilwe refugee camp.

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