

Beyond the Green Line

by Gray Beltran

THEY were close now. Seta Mergonian could hear the shells bursting, then raining against her house. She'd huddled deep within the basement underneath her family's one-story home. Her family hid in the basement with her—parents, younger brother and sisters, her father's elderly mother who lived with them. Outside, artillery lit the night sky.

Who was bombing Bourj Hamoud? The Phalange? The Palestine Liberation Organization and its Muslim allies? Syria? The Armenian community of Bourj Hamoud was officially neutral in Lebanon's war, to the resentment of the other Christian militias, particularly the Phalange. Right-wing Christian militiamen had already killed Armenians on the streets of East Beirut.

Seta had ceased to care who was responsible for the bombings. After nearly two years of civil war, she only cared about surviving, which, for many Lebanese, increasingly meant leaving Beirut. When the war started, she asked her father what the fighting was about. But even he, a consummate reader of history, novels, and newspapers, could not explain the conflict.

Whoever was responsible for this night's shelling, Seta was convinced that they represented a new form of evil. This is not how you fight a war, she told herself. You cannot turn neighborhoods into a battleground.

But they were. Overnight, divisions Seta hadn't even considered became deadly apparent. We are all Lebanese, she thought. How can you take sides? Still, people did.

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The start of the war in 1975 coincided with Seta's first year in college. She was attending Haigazian University, a private Armenian college in the Riad-El-Solh neighborhood of West Beirut, 30 miles from her house. But commuting between East and West Beirut every day

became nearly impossible once the war started. Seta dropped out of college and went to work at a bank near her home.

Seta's father owned a mechanic shop on the border between East and West Beirut. He commuted to work every day, through roadblocks and checkpoints. Once, he got stuck in West Beirut after work. Seta's mother was frantic when he didn't come home for dinner. Had there been a bombing near his garage? Was he kidnapped? Murdered? Often during heavy fighting the phone lines would go dead. Distraught people in East Beirut would ask those coming from West Beirut if they had seen their loved ones. Eventually, Seta's father called her aunt in West Beirut, who called Seta's mother in Bourj Hamoud. He was stranded, but alive.

Through her father's work, Seta's family became friends with many non-Armenians, Christians and Muslims. A few of her father's Jewish friends had warned him to leave Beirut in 1975, before the country had been consumed by full-scale war. Don't stay here, they had said. It's going to be war. When fighting did erupt in Beirut, Seta's father could not deny their prescience. Things will get better, he would say. But they never did.

Sometimes Seta and her family would go up to the mountains east of Beirut. After the war started, these family excursions helped Seta forget the violence and chaos of the city. With her family or friends, she would rent a small vacation home, escaping not only the danger of Beirut, but also its oppressive summer heat. In the mountains, Seta felt alive. Yet at times the fighting was so intense that she could see the firefights of Beirut from the mountain towns of Bikfaya and Zaghrine, where Seta usually vacationed. Looking west toward the Mediterranean, she could still see the city—buildings ablaze, black smoke rising into the air—its factional wounds festering without surrender.

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By morning, the shelling in Bourj Hamoud had stopped. Seta and her family emerged from the basement to find their house in ruins. All the windows and doors had been destroyed, shattered in a hail of shells. Seta walked out to the back of her house. For as long as she could remember, her family's large backyard had been filled with fruit trees. Growing up, they used to harvest the sweet mulberries together. Her father would climb to the top of the tall white mulberry tree and shake its branches while the rest of the family, waited below with a wide bed sheet, catching the tiny fruits. Seta's mother and grandmother would dry the leftover mulberries for winter. Now, amidst the fruit trees and the garden, the backyard was buried in shrapnel, a strange, metallic fruit mingled amongst the fallen white mulberries, figs, and red grapes.

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It was Sunday morning in Ain El Remmaneh, a suburb of East Beirut. Armed Phalangists waited outside the newly built Church of St. Maron, named in honor of the monk who founded the Maronite religious movement. On the street, members of the Christian militia diverted cars away from the church. Inside, the leader of the Phalange, Pierre Gemayel, attended a consecration service.

The Lebanese Phalangists took their name from the Falange of Spain, the country's single official party after the Spanish Civil War. As the Spanish Falange declined, the Phalange gained strength in Lebanon. Officially, the Lebanese Phalange considered itself a secular political party, but, like its Spanish precursor, Christianity remained at the heart of its identity.

The Phalangists heard gunfire. They saw a group of Palestinian militiamen driving towards the church in a Jeep, shooting rifles at the sky. The Phalangists tried to divert the vehicle, but the Palestinians refused to obey their orders. The Phalangists opened fire first and the Palestinians shot back. When the fighting was over, one Palestinian, the driver, was dead. Three Phalangists

were killed. Pierre Gemayel and his followers regarded the incident as a failed assassination attempt on his life. Earlier in the month, Gemayel's son, Amin, had almost been kidnapped by a group of armed men, and the would-be kidnappers were thought to be Palestinian militiamen.

Not two hours after the clash, another group of Palestinians drove towards the Church of St. Maron in a Dodge bus. According to the PLO, the bus passengers were Palestinian families on their way to a nearby refugee camp. The Phalangists opened fire, killing 27 Palestinians aboard. The Phalangists later claimed that the bus carried Palestinian fighters, armed reinforcements sent after the earlier clash. After that, the violent enmity between Phalangists and Palestinians spread far beyond the streets of Ain El Remmaneh. Palestinians attacked Phalangist party offices, launching rockets into neighborhoods occupied by their rivals, while a bomb destroyed a Palestinian-owned clothing store. The fighting kept most of Beirut's shops, offices, and schools closed on Monday. By Tuesday, nearly 100 people had been killed.

The Phalange began to set up checkpoints and roadblocks in East Beirut while Palestinians began to exert control over West Beirut. The Lebanese Security Forces arrested several people implicated in the St. Maron incident. The Muslim Prime Minister of Lebanon put pressure on Pierre Gemayel to turn over the men who had killed the Palestinian bus driver. At first Gemayel refused, but after meeting with Lebanon's president, Gemayel agreed to cooperate.

The concession proved to be too little, too late. More and more Lebanese were already splitting off into opposing militias. Smaller Christian militias joined forces with the more powerful Phalange, as Lebanese Muslim militias took sides with the Palestinians. Soon, Beirut would be divided into two halves, separated by what became known as the "Green Line."

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By July 1978, Israel had issued a warning to Syria: If Syrian forces continued to “massacre” the Christian population of Beirut, Israel would intervene in the civil war. The Israelis felt something of a kinship with Lebanon’s Christian minority, a religious group that they claimed Syria was oppressing. Israel was also worried about a Syrian victory in Beirut, and the possibility of Syrian troops being stationed near its border with southern Lebanon. On July 6, seven Israeli fighter planes streaked low across the sky over Beirut during a reconnaissance mission. Israel’s message was clear: We will protect the Christians.

Living in Furn-El-Chebak, a Maronite Christian neighborhood in East Beirut, Shukri Aoun would often see Israeli Phantom F-4s soar overhead before rocketing away at twice the speed of sound. With its nearly 40-foot wingspan and twin turbojet engines, the American-made F-4 was a formidable warrior in the sky. Flying low over the high-rises of Beirut, these planes were a window-shattering blur of brown, green and beige desert camouflage.

Such displays of aerial superiority might have strengthened the resolve of Christian fighters, but they also terrified the civilian population of Beirut. Whenever an F-4 flew overhead, Syrian or PLO forces on the ground would try to shoot it down with SAMs, surface-to-air missiles that were radar-guided or heat-seeking. The F-4 pilot would deploy aluminum chaff or a starburst of flares to throw the missiles off target. Muslim fighters on the ground also tried to shoot down F-4s with flak or ground artillery. When the anti-aircraft artillery missed its target—which was often the case—the shells would rain down on Beirut, deadly miniaturized meteorites that disfigured the city, reducing once-glamorous high-rise apartments to slabs of shattered concrete and exposed steel rods.

In his late teens, Shukri would watch these F-4 flights in awe. Ever since he was a young child, he’d been obsessed with aviation. His family’s apartment in Furn-El-Chebak had a maid’s

room that he'd turned into a model airplane workshop. There he spent hours building large-scale models for himself and his friends. More than anything else, Shukri wanted to be a pilot. Once civil war broke out in Lebanon, he dreamed of immigrating to the United States and joining its Air Force. For him, the greatest appeal of America was the chance to pilot a fighter jet like the F-4.

In 1966, at age 5, Shukri and his family had defected from Egypt and gone to Beirut, where the Aoun family was originally from. In Egypt, Shukri's father was an aeronautical engineer in the Egyptian Air Force. Unhappy with Egypt's politically repressive society, Shukri's father decided to move his family to Lebanon, a place he considered the "Switzerland of the East." Where else in the Middle East could one ski in the morning and then swim in the ocean come afternoon?

After working for Middle East Airlines, Shukri's father became a captain in the Lebanese Army. Captain Aoun oversaw the repair and maintenance of the army's Jeeps, trucks and tanks. He would often bring Shukri and his younger brother, Sami, to the army base he commanded, and the officer's club in southern Lebanon where he liked to relax and play pool. Once the civil war started, Captain Aoun outfitted his sons with 7mm Beretta pistols. At home, they had an M-16 assault rifle.

A few years after they came to Beirut, the Aoun family settled in military housing in Geitawi. From their balcony, the family could see Beirut's harbor, to the north. There, large cargo ships would sit anchored for days at a time in the clear blue water, waiting for quays to open up. Captain Aoun called it the "million-dollar view." Later, the family moved to a large apartment in the Sin-El-Fil neighborhood of East Beirut. But just one year after moving, in 1975, Shukri fled to the mountains of Brummana with his mother, brother, sister and grandmother to escape the

midnight shellings and daytime car bombings that civil war had brought. Captain Aoun remained with the army.

For nine months, Shukri watched as the sun set on Beirut and nighttime gave way to the most exciting fireworks he had ever seen. Since Brummana was so close to Beirut, only about 5 miles from the Aoun's home, Shukri had a clearer view of the city and its high-rises than Seta Mergonian did in Bikfaya or Zaghrene. Late into the night, past green valleys of tall Lebanese pines, Shukri would watch as the Christian forces lit up the sky with rocket launchers and tracer bullets directed at West Beirut. He couldn't help thinking that the militias liked fighting at night—and not just because the cover of darkness hid them from their enemies. There was something more. It must give them some sort of twisted delight, Shukri thought, to watch their tracers and rockets glow across the sky. But even he could not deny the terrifying majesty of the firefights and their fatal, shooting stars.

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Beirut's birth as a city occurred over 5,000 years ago, during the earliest stages of the Bronze Age. By the Iron Age, Phoenicians had established a strong trading and seafaring tradition along the natural harbor of Beirut's shores. Romans conquered the city in 64 BC, ruling it for over four centuries.

Emperor Augustus granted Beirut Roman rights and privileges as a Roman colony, naming the city after his daughter, Julia Augusta Felix Berytus. Roman urban planners laid out Beirut along the grid of a Hellenistic city. Its two main axes, the *Decumanus Maximus* and the *Cardo Maximus*, divided the city into four quarters—a layout that would endure long after Roman rule had ended.

During the Crusades, control of Beirut shifted between Muslim Saracens and Christians, a medieval prequel to the warfare that would later trouble modern Lebanon. In 1516, the Ottomans conquered Beirut and adorned the city's architecture with the columns and domes of Istanbul. When Ottoman rule ended in 1920, Lebanon came under French control. Through massive public works projects—constructing roads, hospitals, sewers—the French brought Beirut into the 20th century.

In the decades before 1975, Beirut grew into a crowded cosmopolitan center with an increasingly diverse urban population. After absorbing over 50,000 Armenian refugees following the Armenian Genocide, Beirut became the destination of Palestinian refugees with the creation of Israel in 1948. By the time the civil war erupted, the Armenians had established themselves in Bourj Hamoud, in East Beirut. The Palestinians were still living in crowded refugee camps. The city's different quarters and neighborhoods all flowed into the Bourj, the heart of Beirut. Buses and taxis clustered beneath the palms of the central square, the Place des Martyrs. Outside the square, merchants hawked their goods in the markets along the downtown alleys. Here, the smell of fish mingled with the scent of camellias and mangoes, as vendors sold gold jewelry and fine fabrics.

When civil war came to Beirut, the markets—or *souks*, as the Lebanese called them—were burnt to the ground. The mosques and churches of downtown Beirut were destroyed. The militias vied for control of the entire central district, aware of its symbolic importance. After months of fighting, the warring militias established a line of demarcation, cutting Beirut in half along the Damascus Road. Eventually, shrubs and weeds sprouted up from the ashes of the city's center: the Green Line.

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West Beirut was already dark when James Corbett left the offices of the *Daily Star*, Lebanon's English-language newspaper. Heading home to his apartment, he could only see a few feet in front of him. The use of a regular flashlight was inadvisable on nights like this in Beirut, making one an easy target for robbery or kidnapping. Instead, James lit up the sidewalk in front of him with a tiny, bean-sized flashlight. He stuck it in his mouth and bit down to turn the light on. He bit down intermittently, not wanting to leave it on for too long.

James flashed the light. It illuminated an Arab man standing two feet in front of him. James froze. The man was armed with an AK-47 and speaking Arabic. Probably Hezbollah, James thought. Probably strung out on heroin too. The man motioned to James's pockets. Reluctantly James reached into his right pocket. He handed the man a few Lebanese pounds. He hoped that would be enough. It wasn't. With Lebanon's shattered economy, the Lebanese pound wasn't even worth a dime at one point. And here was an American in a sport coat roaming the streets of Beirut late at night. Surely he had some American money too.

The Arab man reached into James's other pocket. He had guessed right. James handed over a slim wad of American dollar bills. A small price to pay, he thought. But the Arab man was still not satisfied. To someone like him, foreigners—particularly Americans—must have had big dollar signs inscribed on their foreheads. If they did not have money or valuables with them, they did at home, stored safely.

The Arab man was getting belligerent now. James couldn't understand Arabic, but he could tell that the man wanted to follow him to his apartment. There he would rob him once more. Or worse.

Following the Israeli invasion and the Siege of Beirut in 1982, James had arrived in Lebanon to teach journalism and advertising classes at the American University of Beirut and Beirut

University College. When he wasn't teaching, James wrote articles for the *Daily Star*. His main interest was studying terrorism. In Belfast, he'd written his dissertation on the Irish Republican Army. James argued that the distinction between a "terrorist" and a "freedom fighter" was greatly misconstrued. Anyone who resisted tyranny, he figured, was a freedom fighter—as long as they didn't demonstrate a reckless disregard for the lives or property of civilians. After he earned his Ph.D., he'd gone to Nicaragua to study the Sandinista Revolution then underway. With its factional warfare and displaced communities, Beirut seemed like an ideal place to further his studies. For him, the parallels between Beirut and Northern Ireland were hard to resist.

James's contacts in the IRA had put him in touch with the PLO in West Beirut. Overall, he felt more comfortable living in the Muslim side of the city. James wasn't overly sympathetic with the "fascist" Phalange, or the other Christian militias. Once, he had the opportunity to interview Camille Chamoun, a prominent Maronite leader, for the *Daily Star*. Chamoun told James that he admired Adolf Hitler more than anyone else in history. James couldn't reconcile the fact that Israel was providing men like Chamoun with money and guns.

Living in West Beirut certainly had its drawbacks. For one, the mountains of garbage lying on the streets infused the predominately Muslim side of the city with a foul odor that overpowered even the salty sea air. Walking around West Beirut at night, you didn't actually see the trash. You saw thousands of tiny red eyes staring back at you, sometimes at eye level if the mound was large enough. Rats ruled the night.

When he arrived in West Beirut, one of James's contacts provided him with an identification card from Amal, the major Shiite militia in Lebanon. With his Amal identification card, James was practically untouchable in West Beirut. Any Muslim guard at a checkpoint or a roadblock

would know that he had some very powerful friends in Lebanon. And though he was American, James carried an Irish passport. Nobody hates the Irish, he figured.

But he couldn't tell that to the Arab man pointing a machine gun at him. The man was determined to follow James to his apartment. My wife is there, he thought. Kathryn, James's wife, had come from Washington, D.C. to stay with him in Beirut. The day he picked her up at the airport, there were rumors that the airport was going to be bombed. James had gathered her luggage as fast as he could, hoping to make it out of the airport before it was hit. Kathryn thought he was acting frantic. Can't you hear the artillery, he asked her. He could never get over the sound—the feel, really—of artillery. Beirut might have been falling apart around them, but to Kathryn it wasn't much louder than the U.S. capital.

James kept signaling the man to lower his gun. He hoped his calm manner would keep the Arab man from getting violent. Slowly, James opened up the inside of his sport coat, revealing no weapons to the man. The Arab man lowered his gun. With his right hand, James motioned to the inside breast pocket on the left side of his coat. The man must have thought he had more money in there. Instead, James pulled out a 9mm semi-automatic handgun. Now the man had a pistol pointed at him while his gun was aimed at the ground. He dropped the Kalashnikov and ran off, disappearing into the dark corners of the city. Only later, when he got home, did James realize that his gun had been on safety.

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As Israeli jets circled over Bikfaya, Phalangist militiamen carried an oak coffin from St. Abda's Church to the village square. A Lebanese flag—red and white stripes with a green cedar—cloaked the coffin. The procession was silent—except for the tolling of church bells. The

man who was supposed to become president, Bashir Gemayel, rested inside the coffin. His body was so mutilated that his wife had to identify him by his wedding ring.

Twenty-three days earlier, on August 23, 1982, the Lebanese Parliament had elected Bashir president of Lebanon. As the leader of the Phalangists, he'd united the various Christian militias into one coalition, the Lebanese Forces. Trained as a lawyer, Bashir was the youngest son of Pierre Gemayel, the founder of the Phalange. At the time of his election victory, Bashir was only 34 years old.

Then, on September 14, a bomb had exploded next to Bashir in his Phalange party office in Achrafieh, East Beirut. Bashir was killed along with many of his fellow Phalangists. Almost three years earlier, Bashir's young daughter Maya had been killed by a car bomb meant for her father.

Before the funeral procession the next day, Pierre Gemayel had received mourners at his family's home in Bikfaya. Visitors offered their condolences to Bashir's mother, Genevieve, and his widow, Solange. Both women grieved for the son and husband they had lost to Beirut's bloody civil war—a man whose death would incite Phalangist militiamen to massacre nearly a thousand Palestinian refugees in retaliation by week's end.

Soon after the procession reached Bikfaya's main square, the military bands began playing the Lebanese national anthem. *Its name is its triumph since the time of our grandfathers...* As former presidents and clergymen, Muslims and Christians, gathered around Bashir Gemayel's coffin, the music echoed through valleys of pine and forests of oak. *All for the country, for the glory...for the flag...*