

# Out of Lebanon

## A Lebanese MIT student shares the story of her evacuation

BY AYAH BDEIR

*Below are excerpts from Ms. Bdeir's speech at St. Bartholomew's Church in Manhattan during a press conference organized by the Network of Arab-American Professionals on July 26th.*

I woke up this morning, washed my face, took a shower, and felt guilty. I took the elevator down, walked to work, bought a bagel, and felt guilty. I walked back, rented a movie, went to my sister's for dinner, and felt guilty.

For the past 5 days, a feeling of constant guilt has been lingering in my subconscious, resurfacing to pinch my heart and interrupt my breath.

The reason I have been feeling guilty is the same reason I hesitated before agreeing to speak here tonight. I was in Lebanon when the war broke out, and the reason I feel guilty is that I escaped.

I am Lebanese. I grew up in Beirut, went to school in Beirut, went to university in Beirut. I had been living in Boston, doing my masters at the MIT Media Lab for the past two years. I went back to Beirut for a summer vacation before I went to NY to start a new job. I had been in Beirut for 3 weeks, going to the beach, going out with friends, seeing family when the war happened. The war took us all by surprise, escalating at record speed. My sister Lana also lived in NY, and she had been back in Beirut for one day when the war started. The war was all she saw of Beirut on her vacation.

At first, we were convinced it wasn't a war. It was just a little conflict at the border, pretty soon everything would be back to normal. But we found we were very wrong. We live in Ramlet al Bayda, and from the first night, we could hear the shelling from our house. Everyday the bombs would get closer, and louder, until the 4th day, we decided to leave Beirut and run away to Faraya, in the mountains.

Faraya was the safest place to be we thought. They

would never bomb Faraya. Very quickly Faraya saw an immense influx of people who reasoned like we did, and all hotels, chalets and furnished apartments were fully booked. We were glued to the TV all day, watching the violence escalate. Soon thereafter, a bridge behind Faraya was bombarded. My sister Lana and I decided to flee.

My mom and two other sisters wouldn't leave. Lana and I fought a lot to convince them to come with us. They had nothing outside of Lebanon, they said. All my mom wanted to do at that point was find us a way out of Lebanon. The expatriates had become a burden on the residents.

I went down to Beirut with my sister to pack up our things. The silence was deafening. I've never dreamt of seeing such emptiness in the streets, only a week after the city was as loud, happy and vibrant as ever. When I got home, the silence was broken several times by Israeli planes bombarding the nearby suburb of Dahieh. My sister and I continued packing calmly, as we (and everyone else) had become accustomed to the horrific sounds.

We finished packing and got into the taxi of a Syrian driver who would take us across the border. Ever since the war broke out, he had been driving people back and forth from the border at least twice a day. In the car, I started looking around at this Beirut I never knew.

The beach right in front of my house, Ramlet al Bayda, or white sands, had become black. Bleeding from all the destroyed fuel tanks and power plants in and around Beirut, as well as the Israeli war ship that Hezbollah had targeted. I remember the smell of smoke and gunpowder in the air. In Hamra, the streets were empty, but the sidewalks were full of refugees, sleeping, hanging laundry, standing.

We had two choices to get to Syria, to take the Masnaa road, which was shorter, but frequently bombed, or the Tripoli road, which was longer, but only bombed twice thus far. We decided to take the shorter one. Crossing a short distance in danger was better than crossing a long one. Plus, we were sure they were going to hit the Tripoli road again to make sure it was equally inconvenient and dangerous.

The taxi driver was driving very fast. He wasn't tak-

ing any of the main roads, but going through villages and small streets instead. Surprisingly, there was a little bit of traffic on these. Again, many people had reasoned like us. The taxi driver was driving very fast. It took us 40 minutes to get to the border, versus the normal 80. And yet, they were the longest 40 minutes of my life. I can't remember a time where I was more scared, and my heart so heavy. We stopped the car twice because I had to throw up. But I hadn't eaten anything, so I couldn't. When we got to Tarchich, the driver told us the area was very targeted, and drove even faster. We saw 2 destroyed trucks by the side of the road. "this truck was hit yesterday 100 meters in front of me, I saw the rocket go into it with my own eyes." Now I understood why the driver was obsessively overtaking every truck he saw on the road. A little later we saw a dodge, burnt to the ground, "the taxi driver and 4 passengers were killed". I took a picture because I couldn't believe my eyes. I don't remember what happened next. My brain was clouded and my eyes tearing. When I dried them off, we had reached the Lebanese-Syrian border.

At the Syrian border, we were happy to see a few ambulances heading towards Lebanon. So many people all over Lebanon needed medical attention and medical supplies. We later found out that one of the ambulances was bombarded; its driver and passengers were killed...

We were now in Syria. It was like a huge weight was lifted off of me. That was such an ugly feeling. To look back at your country not knowing when you would be back. To have left it like you were afraid of it...

Here we had to change cars so we could continue to Jordan with another driver. My sister and I were suddenly relaxed. Even though we hadn't been up for a long time, we were drained, and we slept in the car: "this is the first time in ten days I sleep comfortably" my sister said. She was right.

We arrived to Amman later that day. We stayed at my father's relatives. We spent the night watching Lebanese TV, this time from far. This time we couldn't hear the shelling simultaneously with the live coverage.

Next day, we went to the Amman airport ahead of

time. The airport was so overcrowded with Lebanese people who had made our same trip. The planes were overbooked, and an airline official told me that my sister Lana was ok, but I would probably not be able to get on a plane today. I broke down crying. Thank God for Lana. I don't know what she did or how she did it, but she held my hand, she took my passport and a little later, came back with a boarding pass.

On the plane, I didn't feel good. I felt heavy. The last few days I was in Lebanon, all I wanted to do was to get out, spending every waking moment planning my escape. Now that I have, all I want to do is to go back. For the past five days, I spent every resting moment dreaming of going home.

I have been dysfunctional for the past few days, trying to look for news as much as I can, on the internet, and on TV. US news coverage is proving very disappointing. All I see is old footage of Hezbollah guerillas in black and images of evacuation.

One of my best friends followed a very similar path to get out of Lebanon. She is now in Paris. I asked her how her trip was, "The trip was fine", she said "I don't dare complain. We are golden refugees, with our \$600 cab rides, our rushed plane tickets, and our apartments abroad. We are fine. It is the other half a million people that break my heart."

I have been hearing one thing over and over in the past week: "What will happen when Lebanon runs out of dual nationality citizens and foreigners?"

Today my best friend forwarded me an email she got from the American embassy in Beirut: "The Embassy believes that most American citizens who wished to depart Lebanon with U.S. Government assistance have now done so. The U.S. Embassy advises American citizens in Lebanon that the last scheduled ship departure from Lebanon will be today, Wednesday, July 26."

The day everyone was asking about has come. Lebanon ran out of dual nationality citizens and foreigners. We are dispersed all over the world. We may feel guilty, we may feel uncomfortable, we may feel sad, but we have made it to safety. We, the lucky ones, are, for the time being, alive. Our not so lucky compatriots are left back home to die. GSN