

NICK REDMAYNE REPORTS FROM BEIRUT, A CITY FACING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

# A LETTER FROM **LEBANON**

**UNASHAMED, I PEER THROUGH THE GLASS** window of the showroom to ogle the taut curves of two red Ferraris. There's no self-important salesman on hand to point out a yawning disparity between the wealth of my aspiration and the paucity of my net worth. Thankfully, this Martyrs' Square dealership offers buying by appointment only: like most of Beirut, it's seen too many dreamers.

Across the square – a civil war divide between factions – lies the tented mausoleum of the man who dreamed too much: former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the driving force behind the city's rebirth, and posthumous catalyst for Lebanese sovereignty.

Today, in front of the Hariri Mosque, roads are closed off, while soldiers and uncompromising security guards with all the kit – shades, earpieces and walkie-talkies – tend a burgeoning flock of blacked-out SUVs. Lebanese politicians, Hariri's son Saad among them, foreign diplomats and religious leaders are attending the 24-million-dollar mosque's official opening, an event that has been in abeyance since political crisis almost precipitated a renewed civil war.

In typical Lebanese style, bells at the neighbouring Maronite cathedral ring out, heralding the start of proceedings.

Amongst this sea of steel and muscle, a lone Palestinian woman wanders freely, shouting abuse, ridiculing the authorities. A comfortable-looking businessman attempts to pay her off with a dollar bill of unknown denomination. She pockets it without close examination and continues her tirade. It was never going to be enough.

A grinning office worker with binoculars accosts me. "Just look at those guys," he says, "those beards, it's not necessary you know. And wow, get a load of those turbans...."

My fellow spectator works in a nearby office and has come to get a closer look at the mosque's glitterati.

"Oh the Druze, the Druze are here – not to worship, they think we're all infidels, just to show respect. Saad is in there too, but I'm with Hezbollah, he's a whale. His father was a whale too, but he fed

the people. I loved him. This guy, he feeds no one."

The man from the party of God is distracted by three young women and scans them with his binoculars. "My girl's in the green, yes, that's my girl, mmmm.... Here, you want to look? See, we're very liberal."

I walk down towards Place de l'Etoile, past restaurants of empty tables.

"Where are all your customers?" I ask an idle waiter.

"They'll come later," he says. "All this security, the mosque... maybe somebody not want to come to Downtown in case something happens."



Beirut's resurrection from the burned out shell of a civil war wasteland has suffered as collateral damage from more recent tensions. Demonstrations focussing on the nearby parliament building, and a Hezbollah sit-in at Martyr's Square, recently forced almost 90 per cent of restaurants and cafes to close. It caused economic misery for businesses, workers and their dependent families. Now, at least everything is open.



"Isn't it better now the new President has been elected, now the Hezbollah demonstrations have ended?" I ask the waiter.

"Actually, we are from Mr Hariri's people," he smiled, "all these here." He pointed up and down the street. "Yes, it is little bit better, little bit better. Insha' Allah. We live from day to day, not for the future. It is the Lebanese way."

In pictures (clockwise from top left): Man and child pass by two armed soldiers in the Place D'Etoile, Beirut's downtown area. Barbed wire lies in the streets near the shell of the Holiday Inn and lines the walls throughout Beirut. Family life continues as normal in the Place D'Etoile. Posters advertise cultural events around the capital. (All pictures by Jack Davies, except top-left and bottom-middle which are by Nick Redmayne)



**TO TAKE A LATE EVENING STROLL AMONG GEMAYZEH'S THRONING CAFES AND BARS IS TO HAVE THE EARNEST GLOW OF ONE'S LOW-ENERGY EUROPEAN LIFE REPLACED BY A 100-WATT FLOOD OF TUNGSTEN-FILAMENT LEVANTINE LIVING**

I pick a table, order an Almaza beer and ask for the menu. Soon enough, the restaurant is buzzing.

Certainly the heady atmosphere of Lebanese nationalism that transcended political and religious divisions in the aftermath of Hariri's 2005 assassination has dissipated. It was seen off by the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in 2006, by a political deadlock that saw 19 failed attempts to elect a President, by the 'Downtown' sit-in, and most of all by the sight of young men once more directing automatic weapons fire at each other. The idealism of what the West called the Cedar Revolution has been replaced by Lebanese pragmatism.

But accepting that their city is functionally unstable doesn't stop Beirutis

from having a good time. Quite the reverse. In Gemayzeh's Rue Gouraud, a waiter sums it up: "Action, action, there's always action. We're born this situation. We die this situation. There will always be something."

Above the restaurant's ebullient chatter, where conversations mix Arabic, English and French in the same sentence, my waiter brings another coffee,

"Outside Lebanon only bad news," he says. "Thinking it's always Pow! Pow! It's not like this. You come here tonight, everybody out here. Many girls. People outside, everybody outside. No problem."

Indeed, to take a late evening stroll among Gemayzeh's thronging cafes and bars, which range from boho chic to just chic, is to have the earnest glow of one's

low-energy European life replaced by a 100-watt flood of tungsten-filament Levantine living.

Tonight, the diminutive and hip Torino Express bar is at the focus of east Beirut's existential *joie de vivre*. At about the size of a single garage, it's not hard to build an atmosphere here, but like all of Beirut there is something special in the air, not just cigarette smoke and jazz. As one young hipster is happy to explain, "I've been to the States and the UK, but in Beirut it's possible to have the best bloody time ever – guaranteed!"

Then the army arrives. Through the close-packed throng, a Lebanese and an Italian soldier, both in fatigues, advance on the bar. "Negrone, due." No money changes hands, just a nod and a thanks.

At the other end of the counter, it's business as usual. A girl with attitude hair and a tattoo on her neck grips the barman's sleeve between her teeth and demands a banana mint daiquiri. How can he refuse?

Other fashionably edgy clientele mingle easily. There's no reticence in picking up a conversation, and an immediate honesty in its execution.

"I want to ask you something," begins a long-haired Lebanese woman, smiling warmly, "Hamra, you know it? You should come down there sometime. There are many great places."

Like the city, she's full of life, dangerously beautiful, and at risk of being misunderstood. The question is – do you take the chance? For Beirutis, there will only ever be one answer. **t**