

# Where time stands still

By Robert Fisk

Middle East  
Dawn  
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MY home in Beirut has been a timebox for almost 30 years, a place where time has stood still. I have sat on my balcony over the Mediterranean in the sticky, sweating summer heat and in the tornadoes of winter, watching the midnight horizon lit by a hellfire of forked lightning, the waves suddenly glistening gold as they slide menacingly below my apartment.

I have woken in my bed to hear the blades of the palm trees outside slapping each other in the night, the rain smashing against the shutters until a tide of water moves beneath the French windows and into my room.

I came to Lebanon in 1976 when I was just 29 years old, and because I have lived in this city ever since — because I have been doing the same job ever since, chronicling the betrayals and treachery and deceit of Middle East history for all those years — I felt I was always 29.

Abed, my driver, has grown older. I notice his stoop in the mornings when he brings the newspapers, the morning papers in Beirut and *The Independent*, a day late, from London. My landlord Mustafa, who lives downstairs, is now in his 70s, lithe as an athlete and shrewder, but sometimes a little more tired than he used to be.

The journalists I knew back in 1976 have moved on to become associate editors or executive editors or managing editors. One founded a brewery and became a millionaire. They have married, had children. Some of them have died. Sometimes, reading the newspaper obituaries — for there is nothing so satisfying as the narrative of a life that has an end as well as a beginning — I notice how the years of birth are beginning to creep nearer to my own.

When I came to Beirut, the obituary columns were still recording the lives and deaths of Great War veterans like my dad. Then the years would encompass the 1920s, the 1930s, at least a comfortable 10 years from my own first decade. And now the hitherto friendly "1946" is appearing at the bottom of the page. Sometimes I know these newly dead men and women — spies and soldiers and statesmen and thugs and murderers whom I have met over the past three decades in the Middle East, Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland. Sometimes I write these obituaries myself.

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reflect that they must have travelled over the very Lebanese rocks around which the sea froths and gurgles opposite my balcony.

I have photographs on my apartment walls of the French fleet off Beirut in 1918 and the arrival of General Henri Gouraud, the first French mandate governor, who travelled to Damascus and stood at the most green-draped of tombs in the Omayyad mosque and, in what must be one of the most inflammatory statements in modern Middle East history, told the tomb: "Saladin, we have returned."

A friend gave me an antique pair of French naval binoculars of the mandate period — they may well have hung around the neck of a French officer serving in Lebanon — and in the evenings I would use them to watch the Israeli gunboats silhouetted on the horizon or the Nato warships sliding into Beirut bay.

When the doomed multinational force had arrived here in 1982 to escort Yasser Arafat's Palestinian fighters from Lebanon — and then returned to protect the Palestinian survivors of the Sabra and Chatila camps massacre — I counted 28 Nato vessels off my apartment. From one of them, the Americans fired their first shells into Lebanon.

And one night, I saw a strange luminosity moving above the neighbouring apartment blocks and only a minute afterwards realized that they were the lights of an American battleship towering over the city.

War gave a kind of symmetry to Beirut. The smell of burning garbage became a symbol of summer evenings. The wartime electrical cuts would have me racing on foot up and down floors without elevators — war keeps you fit, I once churlishly remarked to a friend.

I remember once, flying off to Geneva to see a beautiful girl (by chance, sitting next to me, was a certain Ahmed Chalabi, but that's yet another story), feeling that

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And still I was 29. I could look back over the years with nightmare memories but without dreams or pain. Lebanon had a brutal history but it had been a place of great kindness to me. It taught me to stay alive. And amid all the memories of war, of friendships, of fear, of books read past midnight — long into the early hours, when dawn shows the crack between the curtains — there had always been the idea that Beirut was the place one came home to.

How many times have I sat on the flight deck of Middle East Airlines' old 707s — from the Gulf, from Egypt, from the Balkans or other parts of Europe — and watched the promontory of Beirut lunging out into the Mediterranean "like the head of an old sailor" and heard a metallic voice asking for permission to make a final approach on runway 1-18 and known that, in half an hour, I would be ordering a gin and tonic and smoked salmon at the Spaghetteria restaurant in Ein el-Mreisse, so close to my home that I can send Abed to his family and walk back to my apartment along the seafront to the smell of cardamom and coffee and corn on the cob.

Of course, I know the truth. Sometimes when I get out of bed in the morning, I hear the bones cracking in my feet. I notice that the hair on my pillow is almost all silver. And when I go to shave, I look into the mirror and, now more than ever, the face of old Bill Fisk stares back at me. Yet I am surrounded by so much history that an individual age seems to have no meaning.

The knights of the First Crusade, after massacring the entire population of Beirut, had moved along the very edge of the Mediterranean towards Jerusalem to avoid the arrows of Arab archers; and I often

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Switzerland, where I couldn't throw a cigarette packet out of a car window, was unreal, false, a bubble of luxury in a cruel world. Reality, normality, would be back in Beirut with its burning garbage tips and its matchstick crackle of gunfire.

I was in this city on the very last day of the civil war, following the Syrian tanks under shellfire up to Baabda. In conflict, you never believe a war will end. Yet it finished, amid corpses and one last massacre — but it ended, and I was free of fear for the first time in 14 years.

And then I watched it all reborn. The muck along the Corniche below my balcony was cleared and flower beds and new palm trees planted. The Dresden-like ruins were slowly torn down or restored and I could dine out in safety along the old front line in fine Italian restaurants, take coffee by the Roman ruins, buy Belgian chocolates, French shirts, English books. Slowly, my own life, I now realize, was being rebuilt. Not only did I love life — I could expect to enjoy it for years to come.

Until, of course, that Valentine's Day morning on the Corniche just down from my home when the crack of a fearful explosion sent fingers of dark brown smoke sprouting into the sky only a few hundred metres from me. And that was the moment, I think, when the beautiful dream ended, as it did for tens of thousands of Lebanese. And I no longer feel 29.— (c) *The Independent*