

Editorial...

A PRESIDENT'S BEIRUT DIARY*

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For most of the nine years that I have served as President of the American University of Beirut, I have frequently said that 90 percent of what I do would be familiar to the president of any American higher-education institution, and the remaining 10 percent reflects the peculiarities of doing business in Lebanon and the broader region. Sometime on July 12, 2006, those percentages reversed to something like 30/70. I have been a student, scholar, and resident of this region for over 45 years, but nothing I have learned in that time is adequate preparation for the 70 percent that I now face.

I have kept a detailed diary since early July in which I have tried to balance my instincts as a political scientist firmly pinned to a small dot on the world's map which happens to be – or seems to be as I write – a fulcrum for a major turning point in international politics, and my instincts as a university president looking to the long-term survival of a great institution. Some excerpts:

July 9: After our commencement ceremonies on June 24, my wife, Sarah, and I leave Beirut for New Jersey. Those were my ninth commencement exercises, and it is gratifying to realize that I have graduated well over 10,000 students. (AUB has more than 7,000 students and 640 full-time-equivalent faculty members). I spent the days after graduation working with a committee on the components of a strategic plan, doing annual performance reviews of the people who report directly to me, and reviewing candidates' files for a number of senior positions.

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July 12: Sarah and I celebrate our third wedding anniversary. We visit the sculpture garden near Trenton, N.J, and have lunch there. This evening we learn from the news that Hizbollah has taken two Israeli soldiers prisoner in a cross-border raid and killed some others. Such events are always fraught with danger but not out of the ordinary.

July 14: Speaking by cellphone with AUB's chief of campus protection, Saadallah Shalak, and provost, Peter Heath, I learn that the Israelis have bombed the Beirut airport, including the fuel depot. That comes as news to me because, at the invitation of an AUB trustee, Sarah and I have flown to San Francisco to attend an annual meeting at Bohemian Grove, which has no television or cellphone coverage – I have had to briefly leave the premises to contact the campus.

Obviously the Israelis' response is more than expected, reminiscent of a similar episode in 1999 when they bombed two power plants near Beirut. Saad Shalak is nervous. He was an internal-security officer throughout the civil-war years, and he expects a ground invasion from Israel. He tells me that the Hizbollahis want it and are ready for it. He is already anticipating a flood of refugees into Beirut. Peter Heath is unflappable. (And he remains so throughout the next three weeks).

July 16: I give a previously scheduled breakfast talk on Lebanon at the Grove, attended by a large crowd that includes the journalist and presidential adviser David Gergen and Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer. I had planned to speak about political Islam, but the drama unfolding in Lebanon demands that I focus on the current crisis. People seem to appreciate my remarks, but I feel as if I were commenting on a Lebanon as far away as Mars.

July 17: Back at my computer, I sent out a mass of e-mail messages that I have queued up. I should have reviewed them beforehand. One, dated July 11, asked the Dean of Engineering and the Dean of Arts and Sciences to start planning for the annual football (soccer) match between the two faculties' student teams. Coming in the midst of Israeli air assaults and sea bombardments, my message seems uncaring – if not demented – until they notice the send date.

July 22: I must get back to Beirut. The fighting is worsening; Israel is attacking all over Lebanon. I have agreed with the Provost and with the Vice President for Administration that we will bring all essential personnel to the campus and house them in our dormitories or in nearby hotels. That allows us to maintain hospital care, the power plant, network services, payroll, and other finance functions at close to full strength.

(Eventually we house more than 700 people, many of whom had been left homeless from the destruction in the south). We back up all basic documentation in case our servers go down. American and other non-Lebanese faculty and staff members are being evacuated. There is a fear that as the fighting intensifies, the refugee problem in Beirut may become unmanageable, and our campus might have to absorb part of the flood. Summer classes are suspended. Our Faculties of Medicine and of Health Sciences put in motion a number of initiatives to provide medical care to the refugees. A trickle of war-wounded people find their way to our emergency room, but most are stuck in the south with no or very little medical attention. Nearly all roads and bridges are cut, and any vehicle out in the open appears to be fair game.

It is Saturday, and I am in our New York offices to interview a candidate for the position of vice president for finance. Remarkably, none of the candidates has pulled out. It is hot, humid, and rainy. At about 5 p.m, I find a text message on my cellphone asking me to call CNN. When I do, I am told: "We want you to be on Larry King Live".

"When?"

"Tonight".

I plead no. I am in a shirt and slacks. I am sweaty and unkempt. Hardly presidential. But I am told that it doesn't matter, and, at the end of the 9 p.m. broadcast, I appear on Larry King Live. He asks me some questions about Hizbollah that I answer carefully but honestly.

July 27: It has become abundantly clear that the looming crisis for Lebanon is the shutting down of its major public-sector power plants – all dependent on imported fuel oil which must come by ship. If the fuel runs out (and we believe there is about a two-week supply at normal levels of

consumption), then the power goes off, the hospitals lose their life-support systems, and the cities cannot pump water.

I spend two days in Washington, D.C, pounding around the Hill and the State Department lobbying for help to persuade the Israelis to allow fuel deliveries through their sea blockade (still in effect as I write). We see Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, R. Nicholas Burns; Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Peter Rodman; and Greg Le Gerfo, director for Israel, Palestinian Affairs, and Jordan at the National Security Council. We also meet with senior staffer Mary Locke of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and several senior officials of the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance. (I like to think that such efforts eventually paid off, although the first tanker did not come through the blockade until August 18. I know that U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman and members of his staff were working on this around the clock).

August 2: It has taken me some time, but I have gotten an orange light from the AUB Board Chair to head back to Beirut via Amman. It is risky, as Israel has bombed heavily the road from Damascus and has begun to hit the northern border crossings as well. It is a little spooky flying directly in to Amman through Israeli airspace, seeing the flat coast near Tel Aviv, then the hills around Jerusalem, then the north end of the Dead Sea before touching down in Amman. I am on the right side of the airplane. Lebanon is on the left.

August 5: Still in Amman. As usual, I wake up around 2 a.m, pulse pounding, insides churning, and a fevered caravan of worst-case scenarios parading across my mental monitor. It has been like this for quite a while. I envision refugees pouring onto the campus in an orgy of looting and destruction of anything that smacks of America. (In fact, the refugees everywhere in Lebanon are exemplars of good behavior – there is no looting, violence, or invasion of private property. Beirut is not Baghdad). Or Hizbollah falls back on Beirut, inviting Israel into urban warfare. Hizbollah uses the campus to launch rockets against Israeli forces, so the

campus becomes a target for Israel. Or, Israel seizes the campus as a staging area in the battle for Beirut, and AUB becomes a target for Hizbollah.

For years my diary has been littered with concerns regarding Hizbollah. The University has students and employees, maybe even some faculty members, although I don't know them, who are sympathizers. We have never had a major problem with Hizbollah, the Party of God, yet I worry about the objective incompatibility between its ideals and ours. Can we coexist? Sometimes I think not, but then I think about the historic role of universities, often embodying a counterculture, an alternative, that some forces in society, including governments, do not like or respect. I try to remember that the great universities on the eastern seaboard of the United States carried on in a society that tolerated and legalized slavery. It's 5 a.m. I am feeling better.

August 6: AUB's Vice President for Finance, John Bernson, has come out to Amman over land from Beirut, heading to the United States to take up a long-planned move to be chief financial officer at Sarah Lawrence College. He and I spent a morning going over financial scenarios for the University. The worst case, losing the entire fall semester, could cost us in the neighborhood of \$30-million. The longer-term concern is what the war will do to our painstaking progress over the past decade in re-establishing our role as a regional institution of choice, recruiting students from all over the Arab world and beyond. Although AUB's student body remains primarily Lebanese, in recent years, the number of undergraduates from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Kuwait, and other countries has increased steadily. What will the war do to our equally successful efforts in recruiting non-Lebanese faculty members? It looks as if a lot of our hard work over several years may have gone out the window.

August 8: Here we go! I have hired a private car and driver to take me from Amman through Damascus and up to the northern border between Syria and Lebanon at Abboudiyeh. Nael, a Palestinian, is a chain smoker. I ask him how many trips he has made to Beirut. "This is my 15th

since July 12”, he says. “It beats what I did before. I used to drive Amman-Baghdad”.

We cover the distance fast, fill up at the last gas station before the crossing, and enter Lebanon. Nael takes my passport and residence card into the Lebanese authorities. He comes back with a Lebanese security officer who allegedly wants to make sure that I belong to the papers that he has just seen. He smiles at me and says in English, “Welcome back to Lebanon, Mr. Waterbury”.

AUB security chief Saad Shalak is waiting for me as we clear customs, and he, Nael, and I proceed to Beirut in about two hours. Just over the border, there is a culvert and low bridge that the Israelis have bombed the day before. We drive carefully around the crater.

August 9: The Israelis bomb the exact spot again the next day.

August 10: We hold our regular weekly meeting of the Board of Deans, going over the status of new professors, the whereabouts of continuing faculty members, what to do about research support for summer projects, energy-conservation measures, and so forth. I also meet with the crisis-response team, chaired by Acting President, George Tomey, whose long and often painful experience of the civil war stands us in good stead in the present situation. He is instrumental in procuring fuel for our power plant on the informal market, although if Electricité Du Liban shuts down for want of fuel, our backup capacity will carry us only a few days.

August 13: A cease-fire appears to be near at hand. I am heading up the mountains to Beit Mery, overlooking Beirut, to have lunch with Ghassan Tuani. Ghassan is the doyen of Lebanon’s journalists and publishers, a former cabinet minister, the father of Jibril Tuani (the managing editor of Al-Nahar newspaper and an outspoken critic of Syria who was assassinated last December), and a trustee emeritus of AUB. As we lunch overlooking Beirut, we hear a series of terrific explosions that we soon learn have taken place in the area of Imam Hasan School in the Dahiyeh (south Beirut) and on Hajjaj Street in Shiyah, a mixed neighborhood of Muslims and Christians that had not been targeted

before. Shadia Tueni, Ghassan's wife, asks us, "Do you imagine the human beings down there when you hear these explosions, or do you just hear the noise and imagine the rubble?" No one answers. (The next day, we learn that more than 20 people, civilians of all ages, perished in those attacks – indeed the heaviest since the beginning of the war – after Israel had accepted the cease-fire).

August 17: A fragile cease-fire is holding. At the Deans' meeting, we decide to resume our summer classes on August 28 and to begin our new academic year on September 27. Moueen Salameh, the Registrar, reports that some 450 out of around 5,900 undergraduates have requested copies of their transcripts – which may indicate the maximum number of them contemplating registration elsewhere. Not too terrible. I send e-mail letters to every new and continuing student, telling them the start dates and that I hope to see them back with us soon.

August 18: The first fuel tanker is allowed through the Israeli sea blockade to unload at the Zouq power plant. We don't have to turn out the lights just yet.

August 29: Our summer classes resumed yesterday with something like 90 percent of our 3,000 summer students present. That is encouraging.

