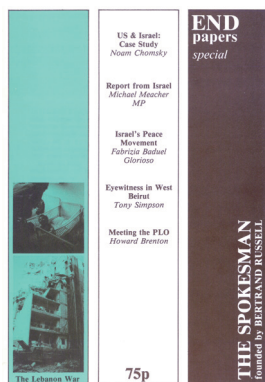


Eyewitness in Beirut

Tony Simpson



Tony Simpson visited Beirut in August 1982 as part of a delegation of European Young Socialists. This account of his visit, a few weeks before the massacres at Sabra and Shatila, was first published in a special edition of END Papers.

Israel's search for a military 'solution' in West Beirut, now stepped up drastically, has been underway for some weeks in the Lebanon war. Their efforts against the besieged city have escalated recently in a further attempt to break the spirit of the many people still living there. In a war of nerves spun out over many days, military actions are mixed with disruptive electricity cuts, which in turn jeopardise water supplies. Worst of all, regular aid raids terrorise the Lebanese and Palestinian citizens and combatants in the city, as well as the Syrian soldiers who remain.

Yet, as we learnt during our two-day stay in West Beirut, the Beirut blitz and the suffering it entails have far from broken the resolve of the Palestinian-led resistance. Their will to fight, and their readiness, if necessary, to die, make them formidable adversaries, despite their vastly inferior armoury.

We entered West Beirut by stepping under a wire at the checkpoint. No one stopped us, challenged us, buttonholed us, or asked to see identification. Nearby, Israeli soldiers looked on, no badges or emblems on their olive green uniforms, while a lorry-load of French UN forces waited to depart for duties unknown. A little further along the avenue stood a Lebanese checkpoint, and beyond that the first Palestinian positions. We had come to meet the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), intending to see how life goes on for the city's several hundreds of thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian residents. Our visit was part of a Peace Mission attempting to increase international pressure to limit further major destruction of West Beirut,

and aiming at a lasting ceasefire.

Our party of eight, from six countries, comprised activists in the European peace movements and representatives of several European Young Socialist groups. Sponsored by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, the Spanish Movement for Peace, Democracy and Freedom, and the International Union of Socialist Youth, our mission assembled in the Syrian capital of Damascus, where we met with the PLO and then travelled forwards to Lebanon and Beirut. We also aimed to explore together the wider responsibilities of Europe's peace movements and socialist organisations to campaign both at home and internationally to stop this war.

When we arrived, the war was already assuming genocidal proportions. The battle for West Beirut was claiming vast numbers of civilian casualties. The Israeli shelling of the city began on 4 June, two days before the invasion of Lebanon commenced. Israeli forces swept northwards, probably expecting to take the whole city by mid-June. More than a month later, the city was still under siege. Resistance led by Palestinians, though organised through joint control with the Lebanese and Syrians, was clearly unshaken. Even after seven days of daily air raids by the Israeli air force, with aircraft returning two or three times in 24 hours, bombing both day and night, all thoughts of surrender by the PLO looked out of the question. Rather, the will to fight on seemed to be strengthening. We were left in no doubt that the PLO were willing to die if need be.

There are two halves to besieged West Beirut. One is bustling, noisy, heavily populated and was, until very recently, fairly safe. Together with the considerable Lebanese and Palestinian population who have stayed put, here live the refugees from all over Lebanon who fled before the advancing Israeli forces. Where they can they have occupied apartments abandoned by residents seeking safer homes outside West Beirut. These refugees have been joined by many families from areas composing the second half of West Beirut.

The face of this second half of West Beirut is withering testimony to the immense force of Israeli fire-power, much of it even now still held in reserve. Around the Arab University, and especially in the areas stretching down to the seashore, there are firing ranges for Israel's land, sea and air forces. They have worked intensively. The result is a terrain which looks as if it had suffered a violent earthquake.

Yet many people still live in these quarters, although nowhere near as many as before the siege. In one part there is a street close by some collapsed university residences which most foreign newcomers to West

Beirut visit when they arrive. They have to come here to register with the PLO authorities. You ask the taxi driver for the office of Mahmoud Lebedy, a senior PLO man responsible for the foreign information department. Reluctantly our Lebanese taxi driver accepted this dangerous fare, and sure enough we had to turn back at top speed on our first attempt as the afternoon's air raid came thundering in. Early in the evening we went back.

The entrance to Mr Lebedy's office is reached through a modest bank of sandbags rising to head height. To one side there is an exhibition of some of the shells that have poured down on West Beirut. Their sizes vary greatly. Leaning against the front wall of the building are several bomb cases five to six feet high and well over a foot in diameter. On the makeshift table in front stand a mixture of smaller munitions. As we reach out for the little ones we are warned that the cluster bombs may be live, so it's best not to touch. A walk through nearby streets turns up an abundance of similar fragments, especially the bevelled edges of the anti-personnel cluster bombs.

Organisationally, the city has responded brilliantly to war. Elsewhere in West Beirut, in hitherto safer districts, the Lebanese and Palestinian joint control have worked to measure up to the drastic rise in demand for hospital beds. Dr Fahti Arafat, Yasser's brother, President of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (Palestinian Red Cross), told us that although they had created several thousand additional beds in temporary hospitals, this was still not enough. The two temporary hospitals we visited, one in a hotel, another in a school, contained both Lebanese and Palestinian casualties. In the women's wards injuries were less obvious, though some elderly ladies were clearly terrified.

Finally our guide, a Palestinian woman volunteer working in the hospital office, took us to the nursery. About a dozen children were there, all in good health, a mixture of orphans from the war and children of the hospital's medical workers. Suddenly, this happy place became a scene of slaughter as the Israeli aircraft roared in and let loose a bomb close by. A second fell still nearer. We ran towards the school's central corridors, thronged with evacuees from vulnerable wards opening to the gardens outside. As we waited to leave, early casualties of this latest assault, all of them children, one streaming blood from her head and legs, were rushed in from cars and ambulances. Overhead the fighters continued to swoop and roar, apparently safe from the barrage of PLO fire. It is at this mounting price in human suffering that Israel single-mindedly pursues its military 'solution' in West Beirut. They talk of plans for evacuation and

question PLO seriousness in considering such options, yet the Israeli aim is to destroy the PLO infrastructure concentrated in the districts of West Beirut. Bit by bit the siege pressures are stepped up, ceasefires are called and broken within hours. What will be the conclusion?

Within Israel itself, it seems, opposition to the war is running at a high level. Although they are obviously not yet effective in restraining Mr Begin's military 'solution', 'Peace Now', 'Campaign to Stop the War in the Lebanon', and other oppositional groups in Israel need international support and encouragement. With this in mind, a second limb of our Middle East Peace Mission travelled directly to Tel Aviv, to explain the aims of our visit to the Israeli peace movement.

Internationally, the Habib shuttle has made possible talk of a 'diplomatic' solution, while the casualty lists rapidly lengthen as the military 'solution' is pressed forward. The PLO are most bitter about the lack of support from the Arab world, especially the absence of any moves to apply sanctions to the US, at whose door they lay ultimate blame for the war.

The ultimate opposition to Israel's military offensive in West Beirut lies with the PLO themselves, and particularly with the resistance and civilians who are under siege. Though tense, they were not intimidated by the bombardments. They are proud of their long resistance against all the military odds, and even optimistic that something good might come from this impasse. Possibly there might be a shift in the American position. Extraordinary as it may seem, relaxing between air raids, the PLO combatants are cheerful and friendly. While we were there they even found the energy for a game of football in the street outside Lebedy's office. We asked, 'will you fight street to street?'. The answer came back: 'No. Room by room'.



Shireen Abu Akleh, 1971-2022