

Nuha Salib Salibi: On Car-Bombs and People

On the 5th of February 1983 a car bomb exploded outside the offices of the Palestinian Research Centre in Beirut. Many of people were killed and wounded. They called it the massacre of Hamra. Many were to follow, more devastating and violent, but in the collective memory of Beirut, this particular incident remained horrific as the first of its kind.

Here is an eyewitness account by BUC English Instructor Nuha Salibi whose apartment is a few yards from the site of the explosion*.

It was a bleak February Saturday, an end to a week when nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. Families were busy either gathering around their lunch tables or hurrying home for the weekend break. In my home, we had just finished lunch. My husband had gone to have his siesta, my daughter was in the kitchen washing the dishes, and I had just left to go and wash my hands. Luckily, none of us were in the same room because this is how we were saved. Quite suddenly, I felt a tremor go from the top of my head throughout my body. Somewhere in my mind the message registered, «Here it is» it being the ninth drastic bomb and rocket explosion we had suffered from in this long period of war. Yet something kept me rooted in my place. I must have blacked out for a minute before I was galvanized into action as I heard my husband move in the next room. I realised what had happened must have been horrible and I started shrieking for my daughter. I shouted and shouted and tried to move to where the kitchen was situated. Of course, in the meantime, the fires had started to rage while the glass was still falling. All around people were screaming for help; all hell had broken loose. As I came to the door of the hallway, treading over glass and furniture, our neighbour

came out of his house pleading for help. The sight he presented was unbelievable: his Adam's apple was hanging out like a slain chicken's with blood bathing his face and hands. Unconsciously, I found myself screeching at the top of my voice, «You need a hospital. Go to the hospital».

My husband started calling from the room. He wanted his shirt and tie. Where could I find them in all this rubble? My daughter came from the kitchen trembling and crying. «Mummy, Daddy», over and over. She was afraid for her father with his heart condition, afraid for me, afraid of the whole rotten mess. I could not believe she was in one piece as I gathered her to me, weeping soundlessly.....

At the end of the day, the neighbours in my building looked like war veterans. Some had faces like sieves; others were swathed in bandages; a bed-ridden sick woman had to be admitted into hospital with six severed tendons. The stories can go on but we still felt we were lucky, because so many others had died. The owner of the little grocery store was burned to death although his son was able to save himself. The bicycle of a thirteen-year-old, a professor's brilliant son living two buildings away, was the only trace left of him. A father and his young daughter were blown into bits as she came down to the car to welcome him. A high school student, a pretty healthy girl, became a heap of flesh as she went home from the cleaner's under my home. A fine arts graduating senior in the college where I teach was trapped in her car as she

* This account was first published in 1983 in a booklet entitled «On the Road to Recovery» and distributed by the author to close friends.

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was passing, losing her ear, nose, and eyesight in the process. Around 15 employees in the building next door were killed, people we knew and people we did not. Yet each individual had a family and this family became bereaved.

As for our homes. They were a wreck. The little souvenirs that were more valuable than anything else became bits of glass, wood, metal, and memories. Worst of all was the fear that tore us apart. At night I still dream of the neighbours as they cried out in frenzy, trapped in their burning buildings now gutted and empty. During the day I think of the maimed and the dead and I curse myself for ever having borne children or for the worse folly of keeping them in this crazed city.

The night of the explosion, the three of us in the house huddled on the one bed that was relatively clean. We were exhausted and shattered to the point of death, yet sleep did not come easily. A storm raged outside and I worried lest the earth from the broken plant pots on the balcony clog the drain, causing the house to flood. Without a single pane of glass or closed door, the house was like an open-air balloon and not even our thickest sweaters kept us warm. Mummified, we stretched motionless in case the clinging splinters should bruise us. For the first time, we welcomed the howling of the wind which kept us company that sleepless night and we drew the biggest comfort from the knowledge that we were all together, unbruised and unharmed.