

With Bombs Falling in Beirut Lebanese Rap Artist Clotaire K Speaks

Written by Davey D ID2873
Monday, 24 July 2006 05:54 -

As The Bombs Fall In Beirut, Lebanese Rap Artist Clotaire K Speaks by Davey D

When the bombs first started falling in Beirut we reached out to popular Lebanese rap artist Clotaire K to get a rundown of what was really going on.

Clotaire happened to be in France when the first bombs hit so he put us in touch with his homegirl Maya who could look out her living room window and see the Israeli warplanes and ships.

Together they broke down the politics and mindset of the Lebanese people as Hezbollah and Israel square off..

While your listening to the interview, check out this diary of events from my homegirl Layla who made her way from Jordan to Beirut as the bombs dropped and not the other way around. As most people fled from Beirut, she made her way back home.

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Amman, Jordan, 13. July 2006. A morning as any other morning. Waking up, making a cup of tea, taking it back to bed. The phone rings. The voice of my flat-mate's mother, asking me "What are you going to do now?" I tell her that I will get up, dress myself and then go to see her. I'm in Amman for a film-course and I promised her to take some stuff for her daughter in Beirut where I'm supposed to fly back to a day later. She says "No, I mean what you are going to do now about your flight". I don't understand. What about my flight? "Didn't you watch the news?" she asks. "The Israelis bombed Beirut airport".

Maybe I would have been less surprised if I had followed the news a day before: Hezbollah had kidnapped two soldiers in order to enforce negotiations about Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisons.

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I find the TV switched on and Kumay sleeping on the couch, a Syrian journalist who lives in the flat where I stay in Amman. His friend, a 25-year-old correspondent for Al-Hayat, had a bad car-accident in the same night, in which he broke his back and lost a leg. In the night when he came back from the hospital, Kumay noticed that the Israeli cabinet had gathered. Always a bad sign. Expecting an invasion into Lebanon, he slept in front of the TV. The following time he would commute between the TV and the hospital where he witnessed his friend dying slowly. And I would commute between the TV and an Internet café to inquire whether my friends were ok. The airport is declared closed for 48 hours. Air strikes on South Lebanon kill at least 44 civilians.

Amman, 14. July 2006. I receive a phone call that my flight is postponed until 18 July. Later in the day all flights are postponed indefinitely. More people die. Different roads to Syria are shelled. Israeli warships bomb from the sea. Bridges, streets, buildings, media stations are destroyed. Lebanon is isolated by air, by sea and by land. I decide to take a car to Damascus anyway. I just have to wait for a transit visa for Syria. I can't concentrate on anything other than figuring out how to go back and how to reach my friends. Waiting, checking Emails, waiting, checking Emails, waiting. I should feel lucky to be far away but it's just the opposite: a feeling of being stuck in unwanted exile, almost ashamed that I'm not with them in these difficult moments.

Amman, 15. July 2006. More images of dying, burned bodies; people in panic, fleeing in their cars, in pick-ups, in busses, walking. Israeli officials declaring that they are not targeting civilians. Too unfortunate that Haret Hreik, where the "headquarters" of Hezbollah are located, happens to be one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in Beirut. What a challenge to the technocrats of war and their humanitarian minds. Correspondents of the major news networks now report in bullet-proof vests and helmets, introduced by headlines such as "Siege on Lebanon", accompanied by dramatic music. I'm watching from the Internet café. A Lebanese, who's stuck here as well, jokes that they should have left Beirut in ruins after the civil war. It was supposed to be the tourist season; millions of tourists from the Gulf were expected to lift up the economy that had been more than shaky since the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri in 2005. From one day to another, Lebanon has transformed into a war-zone again. There is always something strange about war in our era, something absurd. How can it still happen? Aren't we supposed to live in the age of enlightenment, human rights, international cooperation, and cultural dialogue? Of course this sounds naïve. Not that it wasn't predictable that there would be violent outbreaks on the long run, with major conflicts in the region remaining unsolved. But I have to admit that nevertheless every time I'm surprised again how quick we are ready to turn back to the archaic language of revenge, hatred and death. I call a friend who lives in Haret Hreik. She had fled from her house to another apartment, which however is still quite close. She speaks of an inferno. From the eight floor, she watched people die, buildings collapse, cars going up in fire. Yet, she was afraid to leave her house. What if

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Hezbollah militants fire rockets from her garden? Than the house will be flattened by Israeli warplanes.

Damascus, Syria 16. July 2006. I finally get my visa from the Syrian embassy. There I met an Italian photographer. He stayed two years in Iraq, now heading for Lebanon. He tells me that the coastal border between Syria and Lebanon is still open, 200 journalists entered yesterday. He offers me to join him. But I first have to go to Damascus to see my mother, she's already crying on the phone. She has come from Germany to visit our family there. She also wanted to spend some days with me in Beirut. I had already made plans for her: renting a car and driving through the landscape, hang around at beaches, visit sights and concerts. I take a car to Damascus. On the border, I overhear a conversation between two men. One of them says that he's going to Beirut to pick up a sick woman. I take his phone number and ask him for the price. He doesn't want to say, just answers: "depends on the day and on what happens". We stay at my cousin's house and watch the news. My mother tries to persuade me to stay with her in our village North of Damascus. I finally give in.

Beirut, 17 July 2006. We pack our things to leave for the village. I call a taxi-company, just to ask out of curiosity whether there are any taxis now. They tell me that the border between Syria and Lebanon is opened; the drivers would just use other roads. My mother looks at me and understands immediately: "Look, if you really want to go, then go. How can a mother possibly send her daughter to a war? But I don't want you to stay here and be unhappy". We take a cab to the bus-station of Baramkeh, trying to withdraw money from a bank on the way, the same where I have an account in Beirut. They don't give me money, declaring that this is a Syrian branch, with no connection to the Lebanese one. I shout at them in the belief they are trying to prevent Lebanese to withdraw their money from the banks. A friend in Beirut had told me that the bank machines in Beirut were already empty. Later I realize that I overreacted. It was really just a different branch. My nerves are already blank and then conspiracy theories seem to be particularly attractive.

The cab-driver is patient, drives me around to different banks until I can finally withdraw some money. At Baramkeh, he just says "Beirut", and different drivers rush to the car-window, making offers. An elderly man says he would take me alone in the taxi for 100.- US\$, ten times more than the usual price. He says his name is Abu Milad, people would know him for his good reputation. I want to step out to accept, but the cab driver shouts at me to stay seated, he would do the negotiating. I should trust him; he knows the guys and he would choose the best. He wouldn't send me to a war with anyone. Suddenly he becomes very loud and excited. But I think by myself, ok, maybe he's right. The whole thing is not a joke, and for sure he's more experienced with these guys. We drive behind Abu Milad to the highway. We stop and the cab driver says that he would now take his plate- and telephone number. They negotiate behind the opened trunk. When I take a look to see whether they put my bag in the trunk, I see that they

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are exchanging money. Never before I've felt that cheap in my life. Of course he demanded money from Abu Milad; otherwise he would spoil him the deal. All this talk that he would take care of my safety was a total pretense. He would have sent me with anyone. Anyway, I don't care anymore. Abu Milad looks sympathetic to me. Let them do their dirty deals. He promises my mother that he would treat me like his own daughter. And this is what he did. Later in the car, he complains to me that there were always people seeking to profit from a war. I accuse him of doing the same. But then I feel ashamed. He is mainly putting his own life on the line, driving this road every day. 100.- US\$ are not too expensive for that. He tries to save some money for his daughter's wedding.

The car almost falls apart. The mirrors had literally fallen off. Abu Milad buys superglue to stick them on. It doesn't work with the heat. We drive without any mirrors. Which doesn't really make a difference as there are almost no other cars on the road that is normally very busy at this time of the day.

After one hour we arrive at the Syrian border. Our lane is empty, the other one stuffed with cars. Busses loaded with people who look like from the South of Lebanon: farmers in traditional dress, children sitting next to each other on the back of pick-ups like chicken under the burning sun. The passport procedures are quick. Only the desk for diplomats is open. I show my passport. "An official passport?" The official looks at me in disbelief. "Is this really yours?" I'm tempted to say "no it's my grandmother's". How can a young Arab woman possibly carry an official passport? He continues to skim through the empty pages, with a strained expression his face.

We cross. At the last check-point, the official puts some money into his pocket, which Abu Milad hands him discretely. "They should give them uniforms without pockets" is his comment, "Syria is the country of corruption." Well, no wonder with their salaries... A coffin is loaded on a truck, a TV camera following. I don't manage to ask who the person is. A poor Syrian laborer who spent his best years in Beirut rebuilding the ruined city-center, a person transformed into collateral damage within seconds?

The procedures at the Lebanese border are even quicker. Normally I have to beg for a three-month visa. This time the official just stamps the passport and asks with a smile: "All are fleeing and you are coming?" I tell him that I just want to go home. I'm surprised about myself. I never considered Beirut as my home. But suddenly I'm desperate to arrive there. I guess it's the all too banal logic that you start to appreciate something when it's under attack and in danger of being lost. Suddenly I can understand all those people who hold on to their homes even in the most dangerous times. We always tend to think that it's irrational, why don't they leave to

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protect their lives? But the fear of never being able to return seems very rational. Too many people in the region have gone through this painful experience. Well, for me, it's easy. I live in a relatively safe area. I don't have to fear for my family or my house or my land. I enjoy the luxury of carrying the passport of a rich and powerful country, and in case of the worst emergency, I can still turn to my embassy for help. How pleasant to be a first-class citizen of the world.

I receive a phone call from Beirut that a road leading to the border had been bombed. Abu Milad assures me that he wanted to take another road anyway. We will go through Zahlé instead of Chtoura, a way through the mountains which would take us probably one hour longer. We drive down to the Bekaa-valley. The same absurd feeling befalls me as when I drove into Ramallah or Baghdad for the first time: Where is the war? We often imagine war to be the continuous flattening of cities, populations shouting and crying and bleeding and dying, shooting and shelling, buildings vanishing into black smoke, concrete transforming into piles of rubble, loud noises of explosions, guns and tanks and warships and other war machinery – everything in complete chaos. Not to say that this is not the case. With more than 50 people dying every day in Baghdad, the ongoing events in Palestine and what's happening today in the Lebanese cities of Nabatiyeh, Tyre, Saida, Baalbeck and Beirut, more than terrifying scenes are taking place every day. But war is hiding also in the normal, the quiet, and even in the romantic and beautiful. Ramallah can give the perfect illusion of a picturesque mountain village, Baghdad the one of a big, developed and modern city. Sometimes it's difficult to read small signs that are the signs of war: closed shops on a Monday, roadblocks where there is no construction site, hour-long traffic jams where the roads are broad enough, young unshaved men in uniforms sleeping in parks or on sidewalks while their barracks are empty, children begging on the streets in front of Armani and Versace stores, people buying food hastily where there is still enough time until shops close, white cars with blue UN signs driving around the streets although the UN can never enforce a decision against the powerful anyway.

Usually the road to the Bekaa-valley is flanked by busy shops: kiosks, cafés, mechanics. This time all of them are closed, no human soul on the street. Italian, German, Brazilian and French flags are still hanging from the balconies, reminiscent of the world-cup that the Lebanese audiences followed with waves of enthusiasm. At one point a big hole in the ground opens in front of us where the road should be. This is where they bombed already two or three days ago. We take a right in the direction of Zahlé. At one crossroads, Abu Milad seems confused. We drive some kilometers into a field until he turns back. "I'm feeling drunk without having drunk any Arak," he says. First doubts creep up my mind. He asks a farmer who points with his arm: "Don't go right, because the bridge has been shelled. Don't go straight, because the road has been shelled. Go left then." We lose the way and drive around for an hour. I don't feel very comfortable on the plain field between destroyed roads and bridges and I ask myself whether it was such a good idea to not take the coastal road as the Italian photographer had advised me. Anyway too late. Other cars are also lost. The drivers ask either for Beirut or the border. Finally we arrive in Zahlé where we discover that one tire is flat. It takes us another hour to fix it. Abu Milad is tired and sweating from the work. An old man shouldn't do such work, driving taxi all

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day long and destroy his back. He should sit in a comfortable armchair and enjoy his pension. I invite him to a cold coke in Café Hollywood. Shaggy sings “Hey sexy lady”. A soldier inquires where we are going. He advises us not to use the coastal road in Beirut. “Just move between buildings, it’s safer.”

We go up the mountains and continue to Antoura. We pass by a shelled radar-station. I’ve never taken this road. The view is breath-taking, green like in paradise. Little white stone houses with flowers in their gardens, old men playing cards or Tawla. Where is the war here? It shouts from the radios and the televisions that are installed on little tables so people can watch and listen outside in the fresh and cool air. We stop again and order sandwiches. Abu Milad gives me a lecture about the virtues of the Arab family. The cook asks me to get cucumbers from her kitchen. Abu Milad criticizes her, how can she possibly order a customer to get her vegetables? Her answer is that I’m not her customer, that I’m her daughter. “There are no strangers in this house, we’re all a family.” He nods self-satisfied: “See, this is what I was explaining to you.”

From now on, the road becomes more and more beautiful. In every village the visitor is welcomed with a polite “Bienvenue” and bid farewell with a “Merci pour votre visite”. The shops are opened, people strolling on the streets, sitting in cafés, drinking cappuccino. Almost no signs of war – except: no foreign tourists to spot. In these places, rich tourists from the Gulf usually escape the desert sun during the summer months. Abu Milad sings for me all songs that he remembers that are dedicated to women named “Layla”. We pass by a village with the strange name of “Bologna”, later through Bkfaya, a strong-hold of the Phalange. Abu Milad lectures again: how the Phalange have taught the Lebanese to love, to be civilized and democratic, to care for their families – “God, the fatherland, the family”, the holy trinity. No word about their right-wing ideology, their role in the killings of Palestinian refugees. He claims that it’s the Palestinians who brought the war to Lebanon. In Lebanon, it’s always the other who’s responsible for the country’s unlucky history. He goes on to say that he educated his children as good Roman Catholics, not to lie and not to kill. “In the war, Muslims killed Christians and Christians killed Muslims. This should never happen again”

We arrive in Antelias, at the coast north of Beirut. Busy roads. Then suddenly in Beirut, completely empty streets. The port that was shelled on our right. Ignoring the advice of the soldier, we drive along the Corniche, the coastal road of Beirut – were we usually walk along, eat ice-cream, or have our last tea in the early morning after nightly dancing in Baromètre, our favorite pub. What we especially love about the Corniche is that it’s one of the few public spaces in Beirut that is accessible for everyone – for the rich and snobby, for the poor, for girls in headscarves or mini-skirts, for women with baby carriages, for joggers, for Tai Chi-practitioners, for families sitting on plastic chairs and smoking water-pipe, for Syrian workers, for pubescent teenagers listening to hip-hop from their opened car windows, for young

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lovers, for old couples, for people selling coffee and grilled corn, for beggars, and for suicidal swimmers. Whenever you walk down to the Corniche, no matter at what time of the day or the night, it's always populated. Not so today.

I arrive at home. Nobody's there and no electricity. I call Muzna, my flat-mate. Her first question: "From where are you calling?" – "From home" – "You're joking". She's in a meeting with activists at Zico House, a center for alternative culture where also a lot of NGOs have their offices, from environmental organizations to the only association for gays and lesbians in the Middle East. I join them there. Everyone's sitting around in the garden café, busy talking, discussing, writing texts for the many blogs that popped up on the war, telling inside stories to the outside world.

Muzna did interviews with refugees in order to feed foreign media stations with testimonies, filmed by people who work for Beirut DC, an organization that promotes Arab cinema. We drive there and they show us the video-clip they produced for the TV. It's called "Samidoun". "Sumoud" is a word well known from Palestine. It means steadfastness. When people call themselves "samidoun" they declare that they're staying. That nobody and nothing can force them to leave. I let them alone to check my Emails and to call some people that I'm back. Bombs are going down on the harbor.

In the night we meet again at Baromètre. From there we hear the bombing in the suburbs. One explosion sounds as if it just hit around the corner. A girl sitting at our table jumps up and circles around herself in sudden panic. Muzna comforts me. "It just sounds close because this is a rocket fired from a warship. After a while you will be able to distinguish the sounds." Some of these sounds of war are still engraved in my memory of Palestine. The dump sound of F16 warplanes made in the US, the crackling sound of gunshots. Some of the rockets of which I don't know the technical terms looked like falling stars, little lights flying slowly in a bow and then hitting with a massive explosion. When they were still flying above your head, you would instinctively try to run, but in which direction? When they hit, the heart would stop for a second. And my brain would always automatically spit out the sentence "We're all going to die". An irrational thought because most of the times I was in safe distance. But my brain would just repeat it, without me being able to control it. Discussions about the situation; anger towards the Western media that rally behind Israel, criticism towards Hezbollah is mounting. A friend of ours calls Muzna from Paris, offering his flat to people in need. Sanayeh, the central park in Beirut is full of people who fled the South. They were told to gather there, where they would be picked up to take shelter in schools with access to sanitation. Since several days and nights they are sleeping in the grass, being exposed to heat and unbearable humidity during day-time – without water, without any services, without anyone picking them up.

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We return home late at night. Our apartment has become a place of refuge. Mariam, a girl from Tyre on the South is staying there, not able anymore to go back home, and Ismail, a Palestinian from the refugee camp of Bourj Al-Barajneh who needs to stay in Beirut in order to be able to carry out activities. What a terror this must be for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who are staying Lebanon since 60 years deprived of the most basic human rights in a temporary state of endless waiting, and now not even feeling safe in the place where they were supposed to be sheltered. When we open the door, Mariam jumps up. Her family fled to Al-Hosh, a neighborhood in Tyre which has been severely bombed during the day. She's terrified. She can't reach them on the phone. Muzna tries to console her; we prepare tea and watch the news. We stay up until 5 in the morning, nobody being able to sleep. Hezbollah had fired rockets at a hospital in Israel. What would the Israelis do now? A BBC reporter talks to a family fleeing from the South in car. The man shouts in rage "This is not fair! These are innocent people!" The reporter asks him what he thought about rockets flying to the other side. The man shouts back: "So? Why do we have to pay for the crimes of others?" 60,000 people are supposed to be displaced within Lebanon now. Another 47 dead only today. But what about the survivors? What about the thousands who will be handicapped, blind or deaf for the rest of their lives. What about the children who grow up traumatized forever, unable to speak, to play, to sleep without nightmares. What about those who lost their houses, their land, their jobs, whose lives are being put in the hands of relief workers, orphanage employees and border controllers. What about a population that has not yet come to terms with the memory of the bloodiest civil wars of our century. That is still looking for the truth about massacres and mass graves. That is still searching for its dead and kidnapped. That is still reconstructing its ruins.

Yes, the Lebanese are used to war. As are the Palestinians and the Iraqis. But what does it mean? For sure it doesn't mean that people don't mourn the loss of their beloved ones. I don't believe that anyone can really get used to war. You can learn how to deal with it, which places to avoid, which roads to take. But getting used to death? Just to the contrary: people living through wars are more afraid because they know that bullets really kill, that shrapnel really handicaps you for life, that blood is real blood and not ketchup. Statistics indicate that the Lebanon has one of the highest rates of depression and stress symptoms in the world. And the more your dignity is violated, the more you will hold on to your daily life. A Lebanese woman writes on a blog that in midst all this chaos, she stopped at a red light. Because it gave her dignity and the illusion of normality.

Beirut, 18. July 2006. In the night, major operations for the evacuation of foreigners took place, coordinated with the Israelis. The French government sent a ferry for some of its 17,000 citizens and other EU-members which is supposed to leave by midnight. But Villepin must have said something that angered the Israeli government. They order the ship to be on the sea by 21 o'clock. Suddenly the captain decides to take off. Half of the people are still not on board; some of them still have their passports and luggage on land.

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In the morning, I meet the concierge of our neighboring house. Ours, a Kurd from the north of Syria, had already left with his family. He says that until the foreigners were still there, he felt quite safe. "But now, that they are leaving us, I'm really afraid. It means that now the Israelis are now free to completely fuck us up".

The first day back in the office. Hundreds of Emails, asking how we are doing. Media stations calling from Germany, asking for interviews. We set a staff meeting for tomorrow. To discuss how to deal with the situation. What to tell our partner-organizations. To possibly restructure some of our program to respond to the current situation. The Italian photographer calls, he's in Tyre: "It's a complete mess down here." The director of one of our partner-organization drops into the office. She had passed by Sanayeh were she saw children staying for days without any food. What are we supposed to tell them, she asks. That Nasrallah is saving their dignity? How can he dare to take the whole country as a ransom, telling us about paradise? And how can the Israelis attempt to erase Hezbollah from the earth? They cannot just expel them to another country as they did with the PLO. Hezbollah are Lebanese, as are their followers. Do they want to kill a third of the population? "All my life I've fought against fundamentalism. Against Christian fundamentalism. Against Islamic fundamentalism. Against American fundamentalism. Now they fuck up our lives within one week. Everything we build up is destroyed again. It's disaster if Israel wins, and it's a disaster if Hezbollah wins. We neither want to live under the hegemony of Israel nor of Hezbollah. And if both loose, people will continue to be slaughtered. Which means we're doomed anyway."

What will happen now? Will it become better or worse? Israel seems to be reluctant to comply with any UN resolution; Hezbollah will not let go of the soldiers. Bush says that Israel has the right to security and self-defence. What about the Palestinians' and Lebanese's right to security and self-defence? Olmert says that Israel is not looking for war in Lebanon, but will not back away from it. But who is dropping bombs and rockets on civilians in order to free 2 kidnapped soldiers? Nasrallah promises Israel more surprises. Wouldn't it be fair to inform the Lebanese people who pay with their lives for his surprises? These are the men who among others decide about the fate of millions of people in this country and in the whole region. In the age of enlightenment and human rights.

I have to admit that I'm really afraid. Maybe the situation will calm down in a few days or weeks and hopefully at least the slaughtering will end. And then – what?