

Lebanon

Reflections during the flight

by Karin Leukefeld,* Germany, Beirut



Karin Leukefeld
(Photo ma)

(Edit.) Middle East correspondent Karin Leukefeld is back in Lebanon. In her latest article, "reflections during the flight", she deals with the impact of the Middle East conflict on Lebanon. Through the perspective of a traveller, the

destruction, the suffering of the people and the background to decades of conflict are described. This creates room for reflections on the responsibility of international politics and the consequences of colonial power structures.

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The flight was calm. The flight attendants were friendly as always, the passengers were lost in thought, asleep or engaged in quiet conversation. Only two babies protested loudly during take-off and landing – when the pressure on the eardrums of the small travellers is said to be painfully high.

The pilot could not have been quieter. Except for the usual instructions to the flight attendants before take-off and landing, he was not heard from during the entire flight. The slow approach to Beirut International Airport led from the Turkish Mediterranean coast over the island of Cyprus. Towering clouds rose above the island, whose northern part has been occupied by Turkey since 1974. In contrast to the black clouds rising from the air strikes by Israeli combat

drones and fighter jets over Lebanon, the towering clouds over Cyprus in the late afternoon were coloured in a warm red by the setting sun.

Just before the Lebanese coast, the pilot steered the plane south to approach Rafik Hariri International Airport. Lights were flashing along the coast, over the port of Beirut and over the city, which the plane reached at Ras Beirut. The passengers were silent, all trying to catch a glimpse of their battered country through the windows. The landing was barely noticeable; only the sharp braking indicated that the pilot did not want the plane to continue to the south. South and east of the airport, there was deep darkness. This is Dakhieh – pronounced Dachieh in German – the southern suburbs of Beirut, which have been under attack from the Israeli army since the end of September.

Not a single shot, rocket or mortar round has been fired at Israel from here, and yet the population of these neighbourhoods has become target number 1 for Israel. More than a million people from Dakhieh and the south of the country are now internally displaced in the north and east of Beirut, in villages in the Lebanese mountains or north of the port city of Tripoli. Tens of thousands have fled across the border into Syria, joining more than 400,000 Syrian refugees who initially fled to Lebanon to escape the Syrian war. Now they are returning to their war-torn homeland to escape Israeli attacks. Israel has bombed two of the three official border crossings between Lebanon and Syria. In Syria, the Israeli bombings continue. In north-eastern Syria, the Turkish army is bombing Kurdish positions, and in eastern Syria, along the border with Iraq, the US army is bombing. Depending on the location, the attacks are justified on the grounds of arms smuggling by Hezbollah (Israel), a threat to national security (Turkey) or attacks by Iranian militias or attacks on the Islamic State (USA). The security of the population in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq has long since ceased to matter. And when they defend themselves with so-called "non-state" actors – because their national armies are too weak and poorly equipped –

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these are released as “terrorist organisations” for shooting.

It all began with the division of the region after the First World War and the destruction of Palestine by the Zionist colonial settlement project called Israel, which began at the end of the 19th century and whose brutal character is clearly visible in the Gaza Strip today. Israel is supported by its great role models, Great Britain, France, Germany and, above all, the United States. Their colonial past is the textbook of the war of extermination that is unfolding before the eyes of the world against the Palestinians and also against the Lebanese.

A day in Beirut

The flight lands in the early evening hours of 17 November 2024. With a German passport, entry into Lebanon is usually not a problem. But in wartime, foreign visitors are asked about their occupation, and journalists must first report to the General Security – the Lebanese secret service – to present their accreditation letters. While she is waiting, dozens of blue beret soldiers arrive in the waiting hall and pass – past the waiting author – in orderly rows through the passage for diplomats and UN personnel. The small, sewn-on flags on the shoulders of their uniforms identify the soldiers as Spanish.

During the drive into the city, the driver A. and the author exchange initial news. *Mohammad Afif*, head of Hezbollah’s media office, was assassinated in a targeted drone attack early this afternoon. In the evening, an Israeli drone attacked a flat and a computer store below it in the densely populated Mar Elias district with missiles.

A. and his brother B. – the author knows both their names – have found refuge in a village in the mountains east of Beirut. Their family home in a village south of Sidon was partially destroyed during the Israeli air strikes. They have had no news from their hometown for more than a month. The brothers and their families receive support from relatives living abroad. A common saying in Lebanon is: “Those whom Allah loves have relatives abroad”. As young men, A. and B. supported their families during the civil war by working abroad. Now it is the turn of the next generation of the family to help their relatives.

Every free space along the streets from the airport to the city is packed with cars. The internally displaced persons from southern Lebanon

and Dakhieh are not poor; many have worked for decades somewhere in the world to build a house in their homeland with the proceeds of their labour. They have opened shops, a hotel or sports facilities, or they have set up fruit plantations to serve the local market. Most importantly, people wanted to invest their hard-earned money in a way that would enable them, their children and their parents to live better lives. Now they are spending their savings on emergency shelters.

The night remains restless. With two heavy waves of attacks, Israeli drones and fighter jets unload their deadly cargo over the southern suburbs of Beirut. Due to the massive and deadly attacks on the city districts of Mar Elias and Ras al Nabeh, not far from the French Embassy and the French Hospital, the Ministry of Education declares the closure of all schools in Beirut for two days. Both districts are located within the official administrative boundaries of Beirut, and the bombings were carried out without any warning from Israel.

In Mar Elias, the main router for the internet supply to the affected street and side streets was destroyed during the attack, reports C., who had to flee with his family from a village in the southern province of Nabatieh. The author knows his name. He had finally been able to participate in school lessons online again, he told the author. Because it is his last year of school before the baccalaureate, comparable to the German Abitur, the lessons are of existential importance for C. Now the connection to the online lessons has been cut, and it will take time for the responsible office to repair the damage.

The first thing the author does in the morning is to go to a copy shop to make copies of the passport with entry stamp and the letter of accreditation for the newspaper for the press centre of the Ministry of Information. On the way, the heavens open over Beirut, and it pours down so hard that an umbrella (made in China) has to be purchased. The displaced persons, especially the men, who sit in front of the houses where they have found refuge, withdraw into the house entrances. How do the families protect themselves who live in makeshift tents on the seafront or along the streets? Where will they sleep when the rainy season begins with the winter?

In the afternoon, A., who has the necessary official papers, and the author travel to the

places that were bombed the day before. In Mar Elias, the building with the computer shop and the apartment where two people were killed by Israeli drones is covered in soot, as if it had been engulfed by a fireball. Cars parked in front of the building have been destroyed, the police and army have cordoned off the street, where passers-by stop to look at the destruction. Everyone here knows the computer store. It is said that the owner was the brother of an official in Hezbollah. For Israel, apparently, that was reason enough to destroy both men and their life's work.

Finding the site of the attack in Ras al Nabeh/Ras Nabaa is like searching in a labyrinth. The residential area, which is close to the French University Saint Joseph, the French Hospital and the French Embassy, consists of seemingly countless narrow streets and alleys, in which high-rise buildings with up to 20 floors tower over low, historic Lebanese town houses. Finally, A. finds the alley, which is cordoned off by the police and army in front of the destroyed building. The target of the attack was the Syrian Ba'ath Party headquarters, a three-storey historical building with green shutters. Israeli missiles, fired by a drone that had identified its target without warning and hit the top floor. Mohammad Afif, head of the Hezbollah media office, was killed, along with five other people.

Afif was an intrepid journalist and media professional who had used his knowledge and courage for many years for Hezbollah. Western journalists were outraged by his public press conferences between the ruins of Dakhieh. The media office of Hezbollah had also been the target of Israeli attacks. Just days before his assassination, he had held another open-air press conference there, knowing full well that Israel had threatened to kill him. Referring to the Israeli threats to destroy Hezbollah, known in Lebanon and beyond as the "resistance", Afif had declared: "The resistance is a nation, and a nation will never die." On the website of the *Al Manar* news channel, which Afif helped to establish, it was said in memory of Afif that he was "a lion in the media sector" and an outstanding personality.

In Lebanese media, articles raised the question of whether such a vulnerable person should be allowed in residential areas at all, where they "endanger everyone". *Kazim Issa*, an 80-year-old retired teacher and neighbour of the house that was attacked, said in response to a question



The headquarters of the Syrian Ba'ath Party was hit by missiles fired from an Israeli drone. The third floor was destroyed. Mohammad Afif, head of the media office of Hezbollah, and five other people were killed. (Picture KL)

from the author: "When someone is accused of a crime – whether rightly or wrongly – it is not permissible to attack a house, a crowd or anywhere in civilian life in order to kill that person." In other countries, there would be a warrant for his arrest, an arrest and a court case to determine the person's guilt. He grew up in this neighbourhood, and as a child learned from his parents how to live together respectfully and peacefully. "There we have a church, there we have a mosque for Sunnis, and here we have a mosque for Shiites", the man describes his surroundings. He had learned – and also taught his students – that there are rules for waging war and for peaceful coexistence.

"Let's say I want something from you, I can't just take it. I can't just kill your family who live there." Today, these rules are apparently unknown to the powerful and the rich, the teacher continues. They are greedy, they steal, they use people only for their own interests, they don't care about their lives and destinies. They have no faith or convictions; they are only interested in money and power. When asked whether the "powerful and rich" have a nationality, *Kazim Issa* waves it away. They have no nationality, no religion, no values, as human civilisation has produced them for living together. Then he thanks the author for coming such a long way to talk to him, an ordinary Lebanese, and to hear what he has to say. "It's good that you don't just believe what the media reports."

It is getting dark as the author and A. reach a camp for 3,000 internally displaced persons in the newly restored old town of Beirut, "Downtown". The people are housed in an office build-



The retired teacher Kazim Issa is 80 years old and is standing in front of his destroyed house. Next to it is the destroyed house of the Syrian Ba'ath Party in Ras al-Nabeh. (Bild KL)

ing of the former Antra Bank and are well looked after. In conversations with a group of students, a teacher and the head of the institution, many details and problems are related, which will be reported on later.

That evening, the author again received news of an Israeli rocket attack in the centre of Beirut. C., a student who has found refuge in Mar Elias,

reports that he was on his way back from the mosque when two missiles, fired from a drone, hit a nearby building in Zokak al-Blat. "That awful noise and terror again," writes C. And shortly afterwards, another acquaintance reports: "The target was the headquarters of the Al-Zahra aid organisation. The building contained food, mattresses and blankets for the displaced." The Lebanese Ministry of Health reports five dead and at least 18 injured who had been working at the facility.

The evening of 18 November 2024 in Beirut ended with the news that Israeli missiles had struck the centre once again. This time it hit a building not far from the headquarters of the Lebanese Prime Minister, *Najib Mikati*, who is only temporarily in office until a new president is elected. Mikati and his team were presumably preparing for a meeting with US President *Joe Biden's* special envoy, *Amoz Hochstein*, who is expected in Beirut on Tuesday, 19 November. Allegedly, the talks will focus on a ceasefire.

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