

Southern suburbs exhale as bombings fade

By Beckie Strum

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HARET HREIK, Lebanon: A car bomb in January sent a wall of keys ricocheting through Ali Dabak hardware store like speeding bullets, recalled shopkeeper Hajj Hasan, whose shop faces one of the six sites where explosions killed 75 people in Beirut's southern suburbs over the past year.

Hajj Hasan gestured toward a box filled with hundreds of jumbled keys, which he now has the tedious job of rehanging. "Every day I try to put a few back as they were," he said.

Like thousands of other people living and working in the targeted neighborhoods of Bir Hasan, Ruwaiss and Haret Hreik, Hasan is trying to go back to life as it was before the attack.

Between the end of December and February a bomb struck the Greater Beirut area once every two to three weeks, a rate that alarmed the nation and drew comparisons to Iraq, where bombings are a near-daily occurrence. Ten weeks have passed since the last attack in the city's southern suburbs, where a calm resilience and firm security measures have accorded a relative return to normality.

Around the corner from Hasan, the owner of Orkids clothing shop, Mona, was in good spirits. Business had picked up in recent weeks, and she was chatting with a friend outside her store.

"Three months ago we were feeling very down, but thank God, we're starting to feel better," she said, before going inside to help a customer.

She, like others who spoke to The Daily Star, credited Hezbollah's meticulous security measures for her relative peace of mind.

"As long as [Hezbollah leader Sayyed] Hasan Nasrallah is alive and supports the people of Dahiyeh [the southern suburbs], we'll be fine."

A gathering of four young women, dressed in loose, black chadors, echoed Mouna's sentiments.

"We feel better and we're starting to relax a little bit," said Malak, 20.

Her friend Reem, 19, interjected: "Even if there were bombings, we would still go out."

But the scars of recent attacks persist despite this defiance and relative calm. Hasan's wife, for example, has not visited the hardware shop since Jan. 21, when a car, packed with mortar bombs, killed four people and wounded 45.

"She used to come a couple times a week to have a coffee with me, but she still hasn't come," he said.

"We had some customers from outside the neighborhood, but they stopped coming, too. They call because we're still friends but they won't come."

More evidence of people moving on is the way in which gruesome stories have quickly become neighborhood anecdotes.

A month after the bombing near Hasan's shop, for example, a construction worker climbed up to replace the signage for a neighboring home appliance store. Inside the warped metal and fiberglass, he found an arm so blackened they initially mistook it for a glove.

"We looked closer and saw the bone and the tissue," Hasan said.

There was also the story of a young man at a nearby store selling fans and air conditioning units. Minutes before the Jan. 21 bombing, he offered his chair out of respect to an older customer from Tariq al-Jadideh. Seconds after sitting down, however, a chunk of debris from the explosion bludgeoned the old man in the head, killing him on impact. The younger man survived.

Locals have also started casually referring to Al-Arid Street, the general location of three bombings, as "Sharieh Al-Tafjirat," meaning street of explosions.

In the aftermath of the string of bombings this winter, many businesses in the southern suburbs resorted to makeshift security measures like padding their storefronts with sandbags or placing large concrete blocks as shields from the street.

Mohammad Rabah's family spent thousands on their tobacco store in Haret Hreik to build and fill industrial liquid dispensers to protect against future attacks. But the relative calm lead Rabah to disassemble part of the fortifications.

"I started feeling depressed because I couldn't see the street. I removed two, but the neighbors are also telling me to remove them all because the situation is better now."

There are other physical signs of renewal. Most of the businesses and apartment buildings around the explosion sites are putting final touches on repairs. In Ruwaiss, residents said apartments look even better than before, with new coats of paint and renovated balconies. From the street, one can see inside a living room that has received a newly tiled floor.

"People have moved to their villages in the south while their apartments are fixed, but they are all coming back," said Musa Daher, who owns a string of shoe shops that were decimated after the bombing on Aug. 15, the deadliest attack so far, which killed 30 people and wounded nearly 300.

The resilience of these neighborhoods owes a lot to the Army checkpoints and growing security measures, which have given residents a sense of protection, Daher said. As he spoke, a yellow truck broadcast a deafening message that it would tow any unattended cars from outside the neighborhood.

Padlocked chains bar outsiders from parking along the curbs of Haret Hreik, Bir al-Abed and Ruwaiss. Only Daher and a local Hezbollah office have keys to the parking in front of his stores,

he said. Also reassuring to residents are the rumors of Al-Qaeda operatives being purged from the neighborhood. Daher pointed down the street to a defunct croissant shop, saying its owner was arrested for being part of the Al-Qaeda offshoot the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS).

As confident as Daher seems about security measures, literal scars remain. He pointed to his lip, where a mark is fading from surgery he had following the explosion.

And inside of Avicci – one of Daher’s shops – a young saleswoman appeared clearly uncomfortable when asked about the explosions. Avoiding eye contact, she began reshuffling shoe boxes, though not a single customer had visited in hours.

Her colleague, a friend, was among the 30 killed in the July explosion and she herself has no recollection of being saved from the wreckage. She was still suffering from the trauma, and her co-workers said they sometimes see her crying.

After all, many believe the attacks aren’t over. Hasan said it’s only a matter of time before another, bigger bomb strikes. And no matter how defiant his neighbors are in their return to daily life, he said: “Nobody gets used to death.”