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People with Minnesota ties on both sides of conflict

People with Minnesota ties have found themselves on both sides of the firing line in Israel and Lebanon. "It's a frightening time."

Warren Wolfe, Star Tribune

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One bribe, two harrowing border crossings, 340 miles by vans and taxis over rutted roads, and a squad of Turkish border guards tearing apart their Syrian taxis were all part of a "very tense escape" from Beirut for five Minnesotans.

Two days on bumpy roads fleeing the fighting between Israel and the Hezbollah militia took them from a Christian suburb of Beirut through Syria to Istanbul, Turkey, where they flew to Amsterdam late Sunday. They expect to land in the Twin Cities today.

Their tale is one of hundreds from people with Minnesota ties dealing with the violence in the Middle East.

"Our plan had been to fly home [today] from Beirut," said Tony Saber, 56, of Dassel, Minn., a native of Lebanon. He had been there since last year doing real-estate consulting. His wife, Terry, joined him a month ago.

"But after the Israelis bombed the airport, that way out was impossible," he said.

And after a bomb exploded nearby Thursday as the Sabers were showing off southern Lebanon to retired teacher-friends Keith and Nelvina Kleven, also of Dassel, it became clear that they should find a way to leave.

The Sabers left family and friends. Their daughter, Shaama, 24, who is studying health administration in Beirut, also left behind her fiance of four days.

"Yes, we're fortunate to be safe," said Nelvina Kleven, struggling to hold back tears. "But all those people who are being killed and hurt in that beautiful country, I feel like my heart is torn in two."

Explosions at Haifa

On Monday night, 75 miles south of Beirut, Dr. Jesse Lachter could see where "waves of explosions" from Hezbollah missiles have destroyed buildings near his hospital in Haifa, Israel.

"The city is paralyzed -- few people on the streets, no trains, most shops closed. I was supposed to see 20 patients today but four showed up," he said. Lachter also teaches at Haifa University, and the 250 American students there have left -- "I hope for just a week or two, until things settle down.

"We're used to the threat of suicide bombers. That's normal -- like drunk drivers in Minnesota," said Lachter, 51, a gastroenterologist whose brother and parents live in the Twin Cities. "But this is very hard. Everybody is under a lot of stress."

During the first Gulf war, Haifa was hit by Scud missiles fired from Iraq, with no fatalities. "But this time, people are dying, with Hezbollah firing missiles farther than we thought they could," he said.

Nervousness in Tel Aviv

In her apartment in Tel Aviv, 50 miles to the south, Jessica Fishman, 25, spent Monday evening in front of her television.

"This isn't normal, just working and watching the news," said Fishman, eight months out of the Israeli army and now in public relations.

She left Mendota Heights four years ago to do volunteer work, and stayed.

"I have lost two friends in the fighting, one shot by a sniper, another killed when his tank hit a bomb," she said. "This is a frightening time."

The fighting also is harrowing for American relatives, said her father, Leslie Fishman, from the family home in Mendota Heights.

"She'll call me early in the morning and start off, 'Don't worry, I'm fine.' And she tells me about the latest bomb that went off near her-- and then, of course, I worry."

'The Lebanon we love'

In Beirut, the Sabers and Klevans decided Friday night to make a run for Syria, catch a ship to Cyprus and fly home.

They made it to Syria over jammed roads, spending a nerve-wracking hour at the border while their passports were taken so that -- with the help of a bribe -- they could get visas. But there were no ships.

So they headed for Turkey. They expected an easy border crossing. But the border guards, apparently concerned about drug smuggling, nearly dismantled their taxis and searched their luggage before allowing them to pass.

The Klevens, both 68, were on their fourth trip to Lebanon to visit the Sabers. They arrived a week ago intending to spend a month.

Warren Wolfe • 612-673-7253

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