

Beirut

Alexandra Petropoulos visits the Lebanese capital and finds a thriving arts scene despite ongoing political uncertainty and neighbouring unrest

On December 6, a day before the start of Beirut & Beyond International Music Festival, president Trump made the announcement that the US would formally recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and set in motion a plan to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv. In an act that reversed decades of US foreign policy in the Middle East, the decision dealt a serious blow to the idea of a Palestinian state and provoked the Muslim world. Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri denounced the decision, tweeting that Lebanon ‘condemns and rejects this resolution and declares on this day the highest degree of solidarity with the Palestinian people and their right to establish an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.’

Arriving in Beirut on December 7, I am curious to see how this international tension would manifest itself within the city and whether the festival, or arts scene more generally, would be affected. Beirut, it turns out, is a city accustomed to political tension and life seems to tick away while the undercurrents of unrest ebb and flow.

The city is marked with reminders of the bloody civil war (1975-1990), which brought about the end of Beirut’s golden age when it was often referred to as the ‘Paris of the East.’ While walking down toward the sea, it’s hard to miss the towering shell of the Holiday Inn (pictured inset), built just two years before the war. In the area that later became known as ‘Hotel Front,’ which saw roughly 2,000 either dead or wounded, the building, riddled with bullet and rocket holes, still casts a dark shadow of the past over the city.

More recently, the country found itself in a political vacuum when it failed to elect a new president between 2014 and late 2016 and saw the largest terrorist attack since the civil war in 2015. And yet while these tensions wash over the country, Beirut still boasts a thriving arts scene, which I have the chance to witness first hand while at Beirut & Beyond.

I ask festival director Amani Semaan whether she thinks Trump’s announcement and the surrounding unease would affect the festival. “Unless it’s something that really affects the country,” she responds, “it won’t stop us from doing other things.” And despite



Amal Waqar at Beirut & Beyond and the bullet-riddled Holiday Inn

Joe Keyrouz

US embassy in Beirut on the final day of the festival, Beirut & Beyond went on to showcase that the arts scene remains resilient.

But this hasn’t always been the case. In 2015 Semaan was forced to cancel the festival, mere weeks before the start. On November 12 that year two suicide bombers committed the worst terrorist attack in the city since the civil war, killing 43 people and wounding 239. The very next day the world mourned again as Paris suffered a series of coordinated terrorist attacks, including the massacre at the Bataclan theatre. With music professionals skittish and the security of festival-goers uncertain, Semaan was left with the tough decision to cancel.

She is quick to explain that the Beirut attack was in the south of the city and not near the festival site however. As someone who lives under a constant blanket of tension, “you’re so used to it that life goes on normally.” But she saw this as her chance to make a statement. “It was really very frustrating and tiring. We got pissed off and I wanted to make a statement. To say that no, life does not go on. We really need to take a step sometimes, even if we’re cancelling, even if we’re shutting up for one month or for one edition, but let’s make some statements. This was the main reason why we cancelled.”

violent protests that erupted outside of the

Having made its statement, the festival returned in 2016, and in 2017 I am treated to some of the most exciting independent music of the Arab region: from Omani-American oud player Amal Waqar and Egyptian singer Dina El Wedidi to homegrown Lebanese artists like punk rocker Kid Fourteen or rock band Tanjaret Daghet. Though, it is the fact that most of the artists come from various other Arab countries that seems to cause more problems for Semaan than anything else. Visas for visiting Arab artists can be near impossible to secure. “The governments always fear other Arab citizens. I have absolutely no idea why.” In addition, the costs of simply getting an Arab artist into Lebanon can be prohibitive. “A ticket from say Casablanca to Beirut is almost \$750, while a ticket from Paris to Beirut could be \$300,” Semaan explains.

But the festival was originally started in 2013 as a way of showcasing to the world all of the excellent music being made in the region, despite conflicts and tensions, and in a show of the resilient nature that seems to be ingrained in the national psyche, Semaan remains positive. “It’s uncertain in the Arab world. We don’t know how things will be tomorrow. Now it’s complicated but it could be easy the day after.” She smiles reassuringly, “the uncertainty can be positive sometimes because it holds surprises.” ♦

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