

Planes Heard, Seen in Skies of Beirut before Blast

Senior Western sources said Western reconnaissance craft were in the skies around the time of the blast, but did not carry out any attack

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Military aircraft were heard, and in some cases seen, flying in the sky in the moments before the apocalyptic Beirut explosion, war-hardened residents of the Lebanese capital told Asia Times this week.

Araz Bedros, a resident of the Metn district overlooking Beirut, told Asia Times that she and her husband were drawn to their 11th-floor balcony last Tuesday, August 4, by the sound of a loud boom.

Bedros, 37, was raised during the Lebanese Civil War, which stretched from 1975 to 1990, and she lived through the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel.

“We ran to the balcony and we saw two aircraft, black planes flying. I screamed to my husband it must be Israel. And then the big explosion happened.”

Although the couple’s residence is located in the hills just above the city, she says she went into wartime mode, ordering her daughter to get dressed so they could evacuate to an open space.

“At first I thought they would continue to the Dahieh,” she said, referring to the Shiite-majority southern suburbs of Beirut, which bore the brunt of Israeli air attacks during the month-long 2006 war. But then, she says, she watched them fly out to sea, out on the Mediterranean.

“US forces in Lebanon were not flying any aircraft in the sky above Beirut at the time of the blast; however, we routinely utilize unmanned aerial platforms as a force protection tool for our teams on the ground,” Captain Bill Urban, a spokesman for US Central Command, told Asia Times.

CENTCOM does not publicize the “mission specifics of our particular platforms,” Urban said, adding he was able to share that US forces were asked for and responded to a request by the Lebanese Armed Forces for video support following the explosion.

“On August 4, seventy minutes following the initial report of explosion and at the request of our LAF partners, we provided three and a half hours of full motion video support over the explosion to provide damage assessments as well as assist in personnel search and recovery efforts,” Urban said.

Senior Western sources told Asia Times that Western reconnaissance craft were in the skies above the Lebanese coast at the time of the blasts. These craft did not carry out any attack, they said.

“The cause of the first fire/explosion is still an unanswered question,” a US official told Asia Times on condition of anonymity. While there have been reports that the initial fire may have been due to negligence, the source noted he has not yet seen “actual evidence to support or confirm that,” and that “other alternatives” are possible.

Israel, which last year accused Hezbollah of militarizing Beirut Port and whose Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned in 2018 that the Shiite group was “using the innocent people of Beirut as human shields,” has denied involvement in the human catastrophe. Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi last week told Israeli N12 television the explosion was most likely an accident.

“If it was an Israeli attack, then this will not be revealed because it implicates both sides in a war they don’t want,” a senior Lebanese source close to Hezbollah told Asia Times on condition of anonymity.

The explosions killed more than 170 people and wounded over 6,000.

Sonic boom

In the city below, Marwan Naaman was leaving his work at Fashion Trust Arabia, whose Lebanon office is located directly across from the port. He sent a text message at 6:03 pm, just before driving off. He says he was about to turn off the Sea Road to get on the highway towards East Beirut when the first explosion hit.

“I turned and heard vrrrrr. I remember the war years we’d hear a vrrrrr ... not like a passenger plane flying, but much faster. I heard that, then heard BOOM.”

Naaman, 48, sped to get away from the Sea Road and onto the highway, and then the second explosion hit.

“This is when the buildings started exploding and the glass started flying. My first reaction was that the city was being bombed, I thought I was going to die now. It was really terrifying.”

Naaman, who experienced much of the Lebanese Civil War, and spent a decade of his life in San Francisco from 1990, says he had flashbacks to the sounds of Fleet Week, the annual air show between the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz.

“All I could think of was the sound of the Blue Angels,” he said referring to the US Navy formation.

Naaman’s testimony was echoed by residents of Borj Hammoud, a working-class district adjacent to the port that is home to mainly ethnic Armenians, Syrian refugees, and migrant workers.

In security camera footage captured in the heart of Borj Hammoud, two men are seen leaving their shops to look up at the sky. One man grins, jokingly pointing his finger up, twirling it around, and then diving it down as if to mimic an expected strike.

In a moment, the grin evaporates from his face and he joins his friend across the street to watch something in the sky. Seconds later, a blast hits, sending the men back and shattering the glass of the entire street of shops.



"I definitely heard the sound of a plane. First came the sonic boom, then you heard the explosion," said shop-owner Nazareth Vandakardjian, 75, interviewed by Asia Times on Saturday.

"It was abnormal. An abnormal explosion. Every single person thought the blast was hitting building," he said, sitting outside his shop, midway through a

game of backgammon with his Syrian colleague.

Image on the right: Nazareth Vandakardjian, 75, says he heard the sound of a sonic boom before the August 4, 2020 Beirut explosion from the Borj Hammoud district located across from the port, where the explosion originated. Photo: Asia Times



Riad Mohammad Ali, who hails from the countryside of Aleppo, and who took shelter in Lebanon after the outbreak of the war in Syria, says he heard the same.

“I fled the war to here. A warplane sound? I heard it for sure – before the explosion.

“I heard it, and everybody heard it,” Ali stated flatly.

Vandakardjian interjects:

“Didn’t we live through the 2006 war? We know the sonic boom, it’s the same sound.”

The Syrian man told Asia Times he had spent the past four days evacuating wounded and helping people clean up their wrecked houses in the upscale Gemmayzé district, where his main workplace is located. The backgammon game was his first break.

Image below: Riad Mohammad Ali, a Syrian from the countryside of Aleppo, says he heard the sound of a warplane before the Beirut explosion of August 4, 2020. Photo: Asia Times



‘We’ve been hit’

Perhaps the most horrifying [video](#), which has emerged from inside the port itself and which

purportedly was filmed by a worker on a mobile phone, records the moments after the final, cataclysmic explosion.

“We’re in the port of Beirut, and we’re hit,” says the petrified man, filming as black smoke billows amid the forest of cranes and containers around him. A transport vehicle buzzes past.

“One minute ago, there was an airplane that did two strikes ... that, or one plane made a strike, and then another came and made another strike,” he continues, aiming the camera to show smoke rising into the sky over French CMA-CGM containers, some of them lit with amber flames.

“We’ve really been hit,” he says. “I don’t know what’s happening.” He quivers before the video cuts.

Elie Asmar was in a bar in the adjacent district of Mar Mikhael, when the blasts occurred.

“The cloud of the explosion, the silence, the dust, is definitely the same,” he told Asia Times of the video from the port.

“I can clearly identify the silence. It was the most horrible deafening silence I have ever felt,” he said.

Asmar said he also thought it was an air strike in the moment, but told Asia Times he does not believe any strike from the air occurred.

In what is one of the clearest videos of the explosion, filmed from one of the luxury high-rises above the port, a couple document the initial fire billows.

They are at first totally unaware of the danger headed their way, alternately poking fun at themselves for playing TV journalists, and expressing mounting worry for those in the port.

One minute into the video, what sounds like an incoming jet is heard.

“What’s that sound? Emad get inside. Honey get inside. Emad! Get inside!” the woman shrieks to her companion, apparently on the balcony.

Twenty seconds into the audible crescendo, at 1:20, a blast is heard.

“Emad! Please, please get inside ... something bigger exploded, dear God, hopefully no one was hurt,” she says. As seconds pass, the billowing charcoal clouds become more intense.

“Emad come inside! Close the glass please,” she implores him.

But he continues filming, even as small explosions begin erupting and orange flares are seen bursting from the area. At 1:54, the final explosion blasts out of the port and through apartment. The phone tumbles and the couple go silent.

Western reconnaissance confirmed

Lebanese authorities say that final, fatal blast was the explosion of a 2,750 metric-ton stock of ammonium nitrate, a notoriously weaponizable fertilizer, which had been inexplicably kept inside a warehouse in the port for the past six years, despite regular warnings and the obvious dangers and illegalities it presented.

US President Donald Trump and Lebanese President Michel Aoun have each raised the possibility that the Beirut blasts were triggered by an “attack,” or “external interference by a missile or a bomb.”

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in an address following the blasts, notably did not raise the possibility of any role by enemy Israel in the cataclysmic explosion, despite weeks of rising tensions along the border and in neighboring Syria, and after a series of mysterious explosions targeting sensitive sites in allied Iran.

Iran has said the explosions should not be “politicized,” while French President Emmanuel Macron, who has assumed an outsized role in managing the fallout and on Thursday demanded an international probe, as of Sunday [judged](#) there was “enough objective evidence” to judge the double blasts as “accidental.”

Lebanon’s Judge Fadi Akiki is currently [overseeing](#) an investigation by Military Intelligence and the Information Division of the Internal Security Forces. Akiki, Lebanese journalists are [noting](#), is married to the niece of the powerful Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.

President Aoun has rejected calls by Lebanese civil society for an international probe.

Israel, whose UN ambassador one year ago said Beirut Port had become “Hezbollah’s port” and accused the Shiite group of using civilian areas as human shields, has denied any role in the explosions.

On Monday, Israel’s military publicly said it was reducing its troop presence along the border with Lebanon and Syria, indicating confidence that Hezbollah will not or cannot reply at this time.

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Featured image: Two men standing on Arax Street in Borj Hammoud district, adjacent to the Beirut Port, are seen in security camera footage released after the August 4, 2020 double explosion, pointing to the sky. Photo: screenshot

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