

LETTER FROM BEIRUT

By James Reston Jr.

A historian goes on a book tour in reverse, shopping his story of the great Islamic hero Saladin to readers in the Arab world.

It was not until the third stop on my 14-day Arabic book tour promoting *Warriors of God*, my newly translated history of the Third Crusade, that I got my comeuppance. I had gone from Riyadh to Abu Dhabi to Beirut, talking about Richard the Lionheart and the great defender of the Muslim world—Saladin Yussuf ibn Ayub. In Beirut, as I was standing in the hallway of an institute of Islamic Studies with my estimable translator, the scholar Ridwan al-Sayed, an elderly colleague of his happened by. The tweedy professor was cheerful in his praise of my book. He had just read it in al-Sayed's translation.

"Is the Arabic version satisfactory?" I asked, shooting a playful glance at al-Sayed. "Did he choose the right words?"

"More than satisfactory," replied the colleague. "In fact, I want to study the English now, and see if *its* words are satisfactory."

On my second night in Beirut, I was scheduled to lecture in the Palais Unesco, a vast cavern of red-velvet seats, located not far from the Phoenicia Hotel, where Arab leaders would soon convene for their summit and consider Crown Prince Abdullah's peace proposal. The event was jointly sponsored by Lebanon's minister of culture, Ghassan Salama, and my publisher, Obeikan. My schedule earlier in the day seemed designed to put me in a certain mood. First, I was taken to meet the prime minister of Lebanon, Rafic Hariri, the man given credit for the rebuilding of Beirut after the 15-year civil war.

And then we were driven through Sabra. For years I had read about Palestinian refugee camps, but until I saw Sabra—where at least 700 Palestinians had been massacred in 1982, reportedly at the behest of the Israeli general Ariel Sharon—I did not appreciate the extent of the squalor. We bumped along a muddy, potholed byway, teeming with people and bordered by stalls of cheap clothing, shoes, utensils. And then we inched past a huge garbage dump, upon which vendors sat and sold whatever they could find beneath their feet. I was being shown the "breeding ground" for the radical groups Hezbollah and Hamas, and I was uncomfortable.

After Sabra, I was taken to meet my sponsor in the ministry of culture, the elegant Ghassan Salama. He began our meeting by announcing that, personally, he favored encouraging every Arab country to develop nuclear weapons to counterbalance Israel's nuclear arsenal. Since Vice President Dick Cheney was touring Arab countries at the time, contemplating opening up a third front with an attack on Iraq, Salama was primed with a counter blast. I was merely the closest American he could collar to express his ire. Iraq, he insisted, was nuclear-free, but whether or not it was developing chemical and biological weapons, we might never know. Anyway, he said, eight other Arab countries already had chemical and biological weapons. Was Hussein any crazier than Ariel Sharon? Salama then predicted another massacre of Palestinians on the scale of Sabra and Shatila.

I tried to argue with Salama, especially on the question of nuclear proliferation. But the contemporary Middle East, I was quickly finding, is an arena of fixed ideas. Across the Arabian peninsula I encountered certain recurring themes. My hosts and audiences seemed fixated on whether the East and the West—Islam and Christianity—were now, after Sept. 11, truly engaged in a "clash of civilizations." They were convinced that American foreign policy officials and the American press were in the grip of a monster they called the Jewish

Palestinian struggle and "break free from the Zionist media machine."

The whole thing saddened me. I couldn't help but think that this drumming on the existence of a malign Jewish lobby undercut the argument about the humiliation of the Palestinian people. Later, in a separate statement, the chairman of the Egyptian chapter, the novelist and Nobel Prize laureate Naguib Mahfouz, called the Palestinian resistance against Israel "the most important liberation struggle of the 21st century."

I tried to avoid the discussion of Israel wherever I could—begging off by saying I had nothing new to add to the time-worn debate. I did not want to be "captured" by anyone, figuratively or literally. I am a storyteller, a historian, a dramatist, not a foreign-policy expert, a Middle East specialist or even, heaven forbid, an "Arabist." If a reader wishes to draw a parallel or make a metaphor out of my 800-year-old story about Saladin and Richard the Lionheart, so be it, but it had not been my intention when I'd written it. If Saladin threw the Christian Crusaders into the sea in 1188 A.D., I did not tell that story to suggest that a new Saladin might some day throw the Israelis into the briny deep, or that some magical thing called the "forces of history" will eventually and inevitably bring victory to the Arabs over the Jews. And yet I was finding



Richard the Lionheart meets his match in Saladin Yussuf ibn Ayub at the Battle of Arsuf, a story depicted by James Reston Jr. in "Warriors of God."

that everything in the Middle East, even medieval history—and my telling of it—inevitably boiled down to politics.

That evening, the audience in the cavernous Palais Unesco was scattered randomly through the hall. There were, perhaps, 300 people, including jurists, ambassadors and religious leaders. I looked out at them, searching for clues that would allow me to distinguish my listeners one from another and address my points to them individually. As Ridwan al Sayed made his introductory remarks, I noticed eight young Arabs, all apparently in their early twenties, file in behind an older man and come down the aisle together.

After having been in Sabra, after hearing the unsettling stories of mayhem and intifada just to the south, and with the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl still fresh in my mind, I have to admit: The newcomers spooked me. Young Arab men, marching all as a group, in the company of a minder, attending a lecture by an American writer on an incendiary subject in

young men was Attorney General John Ashcroft's warning to be "vigilant." Was I the victim of my own stereotypes? Perhaps they were merely students in some medieval history class at the American University of Beirut in the company of their professor. Why not? Then again, might these men be real cause for worry? My mind scrolled through my lecture. If they were truly members of Hezbollah, looking for trouble, what would I be saying tonight that might spark outrage in an Al Aqsa martyr or, worse, rage itself?

I took the lectern and forged my way through the talk, addressing myself almost entirely to the eight men in the middle of the hall, as if I were staring down a potential miscreant in a New York subway. I rattled on about the history of the Third Crusade and why the story had so captivated me four years before. And then I got to the part about the story's modern connections, about its relevance to the Arab-Israeli conflict, its resonance for Sept. 11.

"Osama bin Laden is no Saladin," I said, as I had said so often before to American audiences. "His historical antecedents are the assassins of the 12th century. It was those assassins, brain-washed and blindly obedient to their leader, who first used political murder as a tool of struggle." Yes, I had said these things many times before: Bin Laden is an international gangster of epic proportions, a fanatic cult leader, an aggressor against innocent, unsuspecting victims. These were not, after all, such startling assertions, rather obvious really. But here, in this setting, with an unknown audience, and with those eight . . . I was not sure. I just was not sure.

After my remarks, I was swept out of the hall by my Arabic publisher, Moujir Omari. As I signed books along the way, Omari told me ruefully that the book editor of Hezbollah television had been in the audience and had asked for a review copy. Upstairs in the foyer, tea and juice were being served in good Muslim fashion. A crowd waited to have me sign their books. I longed for a stiff drink, but knew it was out of the question. The night before, at dinner at a restaurant in the hills above Beirut, I had turned to the host and whispered, "Would it be acceptable to have an alcoholic drink?" He paused, then whispered back, "I will ask the guests." "Never mind!" I replied.

Over the heads of those in line for the book signing, I scanned the room for the eight auditors. Someone brought me tomato juice in a wine glass. It gave me comfort to have al-Sayed, the old curmudgeon, veteran of these religious and intellectual wars, sitting beside me, unconcerned and in his element, signing his name happily in Arabic before sliding the books on to me.

In due course, the line thinned until only a few readers remained. And then I saw three of the eight coming toward me. I feigned charm with a lady in a red scarf, sipping my juice and listening to her talk about my book, her cat, her new French coat. I glanced over at the three glowering men. One had a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes.

As I prattled on senselessly, trying vainly to enlist the men in the conversation, I noticed one of them take a last deep drag on his cigarette. And then he leaned toward me and tossed the butt into my glass. He looked at his cohorts and chortled, shot me a leer and then turned on his heels and left. I watched the eight file off, disappear, snickering, down the stairs.

It had never occurred to me until that night that a book tour could be dangerous business. But was it? Or was it only an intifada of my mind?