

# Reasonable Men

Bernard L. Marie

In September 1970 I decided to move to Beirut, Lebanon, to act as the agent of several French companies including my father's company, Alta, which manufactured deep-well pumps.

In those days, Beirut was the Paris of the Middle East. From October to January you could go snow-skiing at the Cedars and come home to jump in the Mediterranean Sea. From Beirut I was covering the entire Near and Middle East, down to Yemen in the East, Oman in the west as well as all the whole countries between, and Egypt in the west.

Beirut—and Lebanon in general—was a place where many different religions mixed. Lebanon and Syria comprised Great Syria, a French protectorate until 1943.

My job was to locate distributors in every Middle Eastern country. Some countries were closed to foreigners; to do business in those places, you had to find a local company to act as your sponsor.

After Jordan lost the war and the West Bank in 1967, many Palestinians ended up in Jordan and in several Arab countries, including Lebanon. The *Fedayeen*—Arab terrorists trained in Egypt and Libya—moved their base to Jordan. They continued to shoot rockets at Israel from their base in Jordan, which resulted in counter attacks from Israel against Jordan.

The Palestinians wanted to take over Jordan. They were acting as a rogue state in the very state where they disregarded the law. One day, September 9, 1970, a PLO sympathizer hijacked a British airliner in Bahrain and brought it to a Jordanian airstrip, already occupied by two other airplanes that had been hijacked a few days before. When the British plane landed,

the passengers deplaned. All the planes were blown up on the ground. For King Hussein of Jordan, it was the last straw. He declared martial law on September 16, 1970. His well-trained army attacked the *Fedayeen* of the famous Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), whose Chairman was Yasser Arafat.

In September, for my work, I needed to take a plane to Beirut from Amman. The Palestinians were fighting all over Jordan; with the risk of being stopped by Palestinians, my alternative to rent a car would have been dangerous; however, if driving, I needed to go through Syria, which was supporting the Arafat army....so I decided to wait a couple more days at the Amman Intercontinental Hotel. I ended up staying the whole month of September.

Black September.

The Jordanian army had decided to get rid of the PLO once for all and waged an intense campaign in Amman. It was impossible to leave the hotel. Hotel guests, me included, made the best of this dire situation. Despite the shooting outside, the hotel chef remained with us. And the hotel kept an open bar. We slept on the floor and put our mattresses in the front of the windows. Although the hotel had power, we turned on lights only when necessary. We were about forty people, including a few foreigners (German, British, three French including me)—mostly people who were waiting to go back to Beirut. We contacted our (French) Embassy, which could not do anything; in fact, the French diplomats, including the ambassador, did not leave the Embassy campus. One night I heard maids and female hotel guests screaming. I ran in the corridor and saw soldiers with machine guns. At first I could not tell if they were Palestinians or Jordanians. Thank God, they were Jordanians. In a couple of days, they said, everything would be under control. I did not believe them.

I gave the officer the name of my distributor and a note that identified the hotel where I was staying. Four days later the officer returned to the hotel and told us that King Hussein won his war against the PLO and Syria, who were both under tight surveillance by Israel. Unofficially Jordan made peace with Israel.

I had taken a risk to come to Jordan for my business, but I never thought that I would have to stay in a city once my business transaction was over.

Later on I learned that the U.S. Navy came close to the Lebanese coast with Marines ready to land and liberate us. No doubt in that case we would have suffered many casualties because the Palestinians would have tried to stop this operation.

From this experience I came to understand what it meant to conduct a business in a civil war. Five years later, I would experience the war face to face.

In 1973 there was a civil war which stopped in 1990 after 120,000 fatalities and more than one million of the population left Lebanon mostly to France and Canada (Quebec). Fighting between Maronite and Palestinian forces (mainly from the Palestine Liberation Organization) began in 1975, then Leftist, pan-Arabism and Muslim Lebanese groups formed an alliance with the Palestinians. During the course of the fighting, alliances shifted rapidly and unpredictably. Each of the five different religious / political factions had their own militia, and they often clashed. The official Lebanese army was a joke.

Palestinian refugees moved to Lebanon and made a camp in a fertile valley in eastern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, known in Classical antiquity as Coele-Syria. When you go to Syria by car, you must pass through this important farming region. I had a car and an occasional driver during my time in Lebanon. He was a Sunni, which was important when we were going to Damas—a four-

hour drive with many Palestinian checkpoints in the Bekaa valley. Today the valley is still controlled by Hezbollah and Al-Jazeera. Some Palestinians created a refugee camp in the Chamoun Stadium—Camille Chamoun was a Maronite Christian who had been President of Lebanon from 1952 to 1958. The Palestinians were making a point to have their stadium bear the name of Chamoun.

My condo in Beirut was located two blocks from the French and Italian Embassies. As is the case in every civil war, one day you have quiet with little or no shooting and the next day the militia would be shooting everywhere. Beirut was divided by the religious groups; crossing at some areas was a gamble on your life because many snipers lodged in the unoccupied buildings. So, traveling in Lebanon, the main risk was to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, which was often the case. Before you went anywhere, it was advisable to inform someone of your whereabouts. Because I did not have family in the country, I contacted a friend to tell him where I was going and the time I should arrive. The Palestinians were kidnapping western European citizens for money, so I kept a Kalashnikov assault rifle under my car seat.

One day I was obliged to go to Saudi Arabia for an irrigation project. I asked my assistant, Emile Haddad, to come with me because not everybody that I would meet would speak English. It was a three-day trip, with a direct flight to Riyadh. To get to the airport, we would have to drive along the famous Shamoun stadium occupied by the Palestinians. To make matters worse, the Palestinians who were pushed out of Jordan and living in Jordanian refugee camps since Black September were trying to form their own police. To make it easy to murder anybody, all the checkpoints organized by different militias asked one question: "Your ID?" Religion was noted on Lebanese identification papers.

Before I went to the airport, I gave my departure time to my secretary as usual, removed my machine-gun from the car (since we were going to the airport), and prayed that we would make easy crossings. For sure we would encounter a checkpoint as we drove along the stadium.

We did. We were stopped by Palestinians.

Four young Palestinians who were living in the Shamoun stadium stopped us. They wore dirty jeans and dirty shirts. The oldest must have been twenty, the others no more than eighteen. I was driving. They asked for our ID. I showed them my French passport and the two air tickets for Saudi Arabia. Emile gave them his ID. After reading his ID, they talked among themselves. Emile and I knew what they were talking about: his religion. The older one, who was speaking in broken English, told me, "You can go. He stays."

I knew what would happen as soon as I left: these guys would shoot Emile in cold blood because he was Christian.

I spoke to Emile in French. "Do not say a word. Stay calm."

I said to the oldest one, "If you kill him, you will have to kill me too. I will not leave without Emile. My Embassy knows when I left, and I am supposed to call them when I arrive at the airport."

These words did not change the situation. My eyes remained fixed on the way their hands held the machine guns.

I continued. "My father makes pumps, water pumps. All over the Middle East, we help you get water so you can grow vegetables and corn. He is not a soldier. He is my assistant."

I had been drafted for the war in Algeria in 1959. I stayed there twenty-six months at Ain Sefra, close to the Moroccan border and the Sahara. In the Army, we learned that you always keep your hand flat on the rifle or machine gun stock, outside the trigger but ready to put a

finger on the trigger in a few seconds. One and all, they kept a finger on the trigger. If one sneezed, he would bring down a rain of bullets that would kill us... but them too.

I had told Emile, "Do not move. If you do move, move your hands very slowly. Do not reach into your pockets. They will think you have a gun."

When I handed over my passport, I did it very slowly, opening my jacket so they could see what I was taking out of my pocket. Not knowing what else to say, I told them a stupid analogy I had learned from my business. "You know, when I am ready to make a good or a bad decision, I always try to see the consequences. Here—for two guys, including one who is from a country which is not at war with you, another one who is not a soldier so he did not kill any of your comrades—you are going to have Yasser Arafat accused of not controlling his people, who are murderers." As soon as I said "murderer," I regretted it. Arab men are very proud; it is part of their education in the Koran. It explains the way they are with women: the men decide, they order, but when a woman became a mother of a certain age and a grandmother, she became the matriarch.

In our situation we faced four guys who thought they were a part of a historical movement which would give them back their country. At least the oldest one knew that if they killed us, it would be a murder. The young ones were playing a sort of game with real arms; that made them dangerous. Finally the oldest one looked at me and said, "Go. Both of you." I just said " *يحميك الله لك جزيل شكرًا* (Thank you, that God protects you).

When I arrived at the airport, the airline had already received some calls from the Embassy. I went directly to the bar and drank a glass of straight vodka before I phoned them. The plane had been held because some of the Lebanese army wanted to know who were the

guys that stopped us: Were they were PLO members or a bunch of young men who wanted to play at war? I answered, "My goal was to get out alive with Emile."

I could not keep my mouth shut. Before I left, I told a Captain, "Instead of being at the airport, you should have troops along the stadium and not let anybody go out without a machine-gun."

The Airline gave us two first-class seats—with drinks—knowing we were going to a dry country, Saudi Arabia. Seated next to me in the plane, Emile started shaking. He must have been turning the situation over in his head. I started to think about the situation and how I reacted. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined being in such a situation, caught in the crosshairs of a life-and-death decision. Nothing prepared me for that moment. Many times in life you don't know how you would react. You cannot rehearse or prepare for something like the encounter we met. I did not think twice before I said, "I will not leave without Emile."

Also, I stayed very calm. If I had met these men in a different situation—if they had spilled coffee on me in a restaurant—I would have been angry at them. But at that encounter, I believe my ability to stay calm helped them to stay calm. I spoke to them as reasonable men. Maybe they had not considered the implications of murdering a civilian, but once it was explained, the oldest answered as a reasonable man. Maybe that was the only time in the civil war that he was reasonable. Maybe he was reasonable for only five minutes. We were in the middle of a civil war, but that five minutes was enough.

Seated in the plane I tried to think. Did I put it together that I would be shot if I stayed? My father sent me to a Jesuit College. I spent twenty-six months in Algeria as a Lieutenant, a specialist of mines. When my jeep drove over a mine, it exploded beneath me and the shrapnel that penetrated my leg put me in the hospital. These experiences taught me to be responsible

for my acts, and, more importantly, to be responsible for the people who work for me and / or if they are my friends. Emile was an employee and a friend.

In 1940, after Germany occupied Paris, my father left France to join the F.F.I. in London, and he became one of the major actors in the French Resistance, coming back to the country a couple of times under different identities to direct underground activities. He could never speak to my mother when he was in-country. My mother acted like a widow for four years. In fact, not even my father's parents knew he was alive during that time; they wondered about my mother when she seemed light-hearted, playing with me as a child. He understood the meaning of loyalty, and its opposite, betrayal. If I had left Emile behind, knowing perfectly what would happen to him, my father would never have forgiven me. He would certainly have been ashamed of my actions. But he didn't need to worry because through him I learned the family code of honor and solidarity in war. Later, when I told him the story of our encounter, he said nothing about the way I handled the very dangerous situation because it was the only thing to do.

Three years later, I learned that Emile had joined the Lebanese Forces (Christian) under the leadership of Dany Chamoun. I tried to contact him, unsuccessfully. Eventually, I came to find out, through contacts with people I knew, that he had been killed. This was four years after our adventure on the way to the airport. I could not save his life this time, and I will never forget him.

When Emile and I returned from Riyadh, we went home on a road that ran along the sea. In the airport, we had met a British man who wanted to avoid taking a taxi for fear of being kidnapped;

he asked me if I could take him to the British Embassy. I said, "Yes!" At one point during the forty-minute trip, we could hear some shooting nearby. I heard a noise in the back of my car. I looked in the rear mirror but could not see my Brit. He had disappeared behind the seat. I called him. Shaking, he asked, "Are they shooting at us?" Emile and I laughed. "You should go back to the UK, my friend. This place is not for you."

A couple of weeks later, a rocket knocked out part of the balcony and wall of my condo. The rocket was not meant for me especially but reflected the typical civil war behavior with several undirected entities shooting just for the fun. I called my father to tell him, "I was not killed in Algeria when I was a soldier there. I am not going to die selling deep-well pumps."

My father answered, "Close the office. Pay the employees three months' salary and come home."

The war was getting very ugly. On one side of a checkpoint, I saw a pickup-truck driven by Palestinians with a picture of Mohammed on the windshield and a Christian tied by a rope to the back. On the other side, I saw a Christian driving a truck with the Virgin Mary on the dashboard, and at the back a Palestinian tied by a rope.

I took the last Air France flight out. They were bombing the airport because a rumor was saying that Israelis could land to help the Christians.

In 1990, the last year of the civil war, in the middle of the night, Dany Chamoun, along with his German-born second wife Ingrid (forty-five), and his two sons, Tarek (seven) and Julian (five), were murdered. Motive? They (Palestinians, Druze, Sunni) wanted to stop a dynasty of strong Christians running the country. I knew Dany Chamoun during my time there. His daughter, one

of two surviving children, was Tracy Chamoun (born 1962), an author and political activist. She left Lebanon in the early 1980's.

**Bernard L. Marie** spent ten years in the Middle East as a representative of several French companies, including two years of the civil war in Lebanon (1959-61). He spent twenty-eight months as a mine specialist in the French army (22 of them in Algeria). He came to the United States as a businessman until he retired. From 1984 to the present, Bernard has devoted his life to recognize World War II veterans who came to liberate his native country.