

## FEATURE

## Ain al-Rummaneh reflects 40 years on

By Mazin Sidahmed

The Daily Star

AIN AL-RUMMANEH, Lebanon: "Remember but do no repeat." This is a mantra echoed by many of the residents of the Beirut eastern suburb of Ain al-Rummaneh. Its locals remember Lebanon's 15-year Civil War all too well.

Forty years after the Civil War was sparked in their neighborhood, most residents of Ain Al-Rummaneh say the tensions of the war have long since passed. However, some say that old feuds are buried shallowly beneath the surface.

It was in Ain al-Rummaneh that Kataeb Party gunmen attacked a bus full of Palestinians, killing 27 and leaving 19 wounded. The Kataeb accused Palestinian gunmen in the bus of opening fire on party supporters, killing Joseph Abu Assi, a bodyguard of Kataeb leader Pierre Gemayel. The claims were refuted by the Palestinians. A statue of the Virgin Mary erected months later is the only lasting memory of that attack.

Sitting in a falafel restaurant behind a memorial for Abu Assi, an

off-duty police officer recounted that day.

"I was 11 years old when it happened. I used to work at this garage that was right there," he recalled as he pointed across the street. "All I heard was gunshots going off everywhere. I was a little kid. I was petrified. I hid behind one of the cars and covered my ears."

For the next 15 years, Ain Al-Rummaneh became one of the deadliest front lines of the war. It was the demarcation between the Christian Ain al-Rummaneh and the Palestinian/Muslim Chiyah.

"You could not stand right here," Mary explained as she gestured toward the road outside of her sandwich restaurant. "The snipers would be watching you."

She said those tensions have subsided and Ain al-Rummaneh now enjoys a healthy mix of people from different confessional backgrounds.

Many residents told The Daily Star that it's common for people from Chiyah to rent and own property in Ain al-Rummaneh today. Inhabitants from either side come and go to each neighborhood with ease.

Mary, however, avoids it if she

can. "I still get scared!" she said with a nervous laugh.

Today, most residents are more concerned with Lebanon's poor economy than tensions between neighboring communities.

George and Joseph, both in their late 70s, grew up a block apart in Ain al-Rummaneh and spent the entire war there. They have surprisingly fond memories of that time.

"There was money and work during the war. You'd get aid ... Now we have nothing," Joseph said.

He explains that the collapse of the Lebanese pound during the war destroyed Lebanon's economy.

While most residents – Joseph and George included – say that tensions are not what they once were, not everyone agrees.

"This is the picture that you see on the surface," said Wadih Abi Rached, the owner of a gym and community leader in Ain al-Rummaneh. "Now there is more tension than there was in 1975."

Abi Rached is six and half feet tall, with a box-like frame. He cuts an imposing figure but has a friendly and welcoming demeanor.

Wearing a full tracksuit, sitting in

a pizza shop – which he also owns – at the very spot where the bus was attacked, he puffed on a cigarette.

"[The Civil War] started with a big incident and the ground was ready," he explained. "Now the ground is ready, it's just missing the big incident."

There have been some minor incidents between Ain al-Rummaneh and neighboring Chiyah in the years since the war, such as a stabbing in 2009. However, that dispute was resolved by the Army, which has a large presence in Ain al-Rummaneh.

Abi Rached expressed his support for the Army but warned that it might not be able to handle an intense amount of pressure. Today, he said, the people of Ain al-Rummaneh are known for being battle-hardened and ready for war.

"We're not like those guys in Ashrafieh," he chuckled.

Abi Rached – who claimed to have fought during the Civil War – said that he was not scared of the prospect of another conflagration.

"If it's war, it's war; if it's peace, it's peace. I can handle it either way," he said. "If you believe in yourself and in the cause, you'll never be scared."

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