

## Angela Solomon

He opened his eyes a crack and beckoned to me. I leaned over the hospital bed, seeing up close the stump of his arm, his dry lips. The fire in his eyes.

"As soon as I'm out of here, I'm going back to fight," he said. "Nothing will stop me, and nothing will stop the Syrian revolution."



It was March 2012 and an entire floor of the hospital in Tripoli, North Lebanon, had been set aside for Syrians. Wounded opposition fighters had been arriving from the battle for Homs that was raging just across the border. The man I met had travelled for days on foot, carrying his own severed arm. In the intensive care unit I met a young Syrian couple and their tiny baby, born prematurely during her mother's traumatic flight from Homs. I asked the baby's name. "We don't know if she will live long enough to have one," said her father.

I was so excited when I got the phonecall the day after my interview: I was going to be the new Political and Press Officer at the British Embassy Beirut. I had spent three years in London and was finally eligible for my first overseas posting. I had worked on asylum policy, corruption in Africa, and helped develop the EU's partnership with the African Union, and spent a few months in New York and Istanbul. But I was itching to get overseas for a full three year tour, and Lebanon was my first choice.

My family has Middle Eastern heritage and for a long time I'd been interested and intimidated by the mystery and violence of the region. Growing up in Wolverhampton in the 1980s I vaguely remember news footage of the Lebanese civil war. The year I joined the FCO, 2006, Hizballah and Israel had just fought a short but bloody war leaving over 1,300 people dead, and the British government had evacuated Brits to safety in Cyprus.

When I visited that hospital in Tripoli I was familiar with stories of oppression and brutality. In preparation for my job in Beirut, I had studied Arabic and worked in Damascus for a year. I met human rights activists and lawyers, monitored pro-democracy protests. My job in Damascus was to advise the Ambassador on how we could push the Syrian government to deliver the reforms the people demanded. In Beirut, my job involves analysing Lebanese politics and human rights. The report I wrote about my visit to Tripoli, and my other work, has in its small way helped to shape the [British government's efforts to provide humanitarian aid to those affected by the Syria crisis](#), and to [support Lebanese stability](#).

My job is very varied. I also lead the Communications Team at the British Embassy in Beirut. We are at the forefront of the [FCO's 'Digital Diplomacy' programme](#) and constantly

experiment with new tools and techniques to stay there. [Last year, my team delivered the GREAT British week](#), a huge celebration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the London 2012 Olympics with [fashion shows](#), [gourmet British dinners](#), [education, cultural and science events](#) and a [fleet of London taxis](#). Wherever I've been posted - Beirut, London, Damascus, New York or Istanbul - I have worked with excellent colleagues and some of the best foreign policy minds in the world.

It's a really great job, but it's not perfect. I have to deal with a lot of emails, and some FCO rules are inflexible: promotion can be slow; junior salaries are low; there are fewer jobs overseas because of changes to the system. Working in the diplomatic service can mean some tough life decisions: when I joined I was going out with a lawyer who earned much more than me, but couldn't move his job overseas. (If you want to know how it worked out, you can ask me on Twitter: @oneroominbeirut.)

So yes, there are some sacrifices. But working here has been such a great experience. There really is no other job in the world like mine. If you're interested in an FCO career, I'm sorry to say there's no magical formula for getting in. Everyone has to go through the same entrance tests, and it doesn't matter where you come from or what you studied. My advice would be: Be genuine. Travel. Read ambassadors' memoirs and follow international news. Most importantly, take the first step. Apply.

To see more of what my colleagues and I are doing in Beirut, [visit WEBSITE](#), follow @ukinlebanon and Like the 'UK in Lebanon' Facebook page. You can contact me on Twitter @oneroominbeirut.



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