A Lebanese Forged by War

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Every time my grandmother begins with the words “Back in those days…” I know it will be a story from the time of war. She starts with the opening line, and I complete it, prompting her to ask in surprise: “How did you know the ending?” I tell her: “There are fifty years between us, and although the war happened before I was born, I’ve searched every detail of it, and I’ve lived through similar events in the past two decades, where the scene most often repeated has been war.”

One of the stories she once told me was about the family’s displacement from the southern town of Jarmak in the Jezzine district. They fled under the sound of gunfire and the range of snipers’ bullets. Along with their neighbors, they escaped to nearby villages, their journey marked by hours of relentless fear, clinging only to the hope of reaching safety alive. What they remember most from that day was how strangers welcomed them with warmth and humanity, opening their homes until things returned to normal—if, that is, those same hosts were not themselves displaced later on. And indeed, that is what happened when the war spread to countless towns.

My family was scattered, some heading toward Beirut and its suburbs, becoming strangers wherever they settled, while others went to Marjayoun, the southern border town, where life was no better. Marjayoun, where they live to this day, bore the scars of war and destruction, particularly since the 1969 events and the Cairo Agreement.

As my grandmother once put it: “Every quiet day filled me with dread, because I knew something terrible was coming.” In times of chaos, every crime becomes possible. People back then lived through unbearably bitter days:if bullets didn’t kill you, kidnapping might. One relative, a young father of three, was abducted. Some say he was killed immediately, others that he was imprisoned in Syria. In the end, he was never found. But the harshest memory she shared was the killing of her teenage brother who was shot dead during

the dark era of identity-based killings. And what a cruel irony: a murderer who killed for identity would, in the eyes of others, be just as much a doomed victim because of his own identity. So what kind of displacement are we talking about, when neither Jarmak, nor Jezzine, nor Marjayoun—nor anywhere—was safe for anyone?

A strange thought often crosses my mind: will I one day sit with my grandchildren and recount to them my war stories? I, too, had my first encounter with war in the July 2006 conflict, at nine years old. I was forced to act maturely for my younger brother, who had not even started school. His first lesson then was this: if we hear planes approaching and feel their rumble, we must run to the fortified corner of the house. I still remember nights when the stars blended with the flashes of exploding shells over Marjayoun, when night was no longer truly night. Some remember "Grapes of Wrath" in 1996. Yes, we started giving wars names. But more dangerous than naming them is passing them down to future generations. Why should we fill young minds with such terms?

We grew used to avoiding lights in the darkness because in the language of war, light signals unwanted movement. Our home became unlivable, so we moved into our relatives' house, twenty of us crammed together in a narrow alleyway dwelling. I could almost hear my grandmother saying "Now you've felt what we felt." The hardest decision came the next day, the decision to head for Beirut. We drove in a convoy of cars draped with white flags of peace, an eight-hour journey. I remember one thing clearly: though there was no stray gunfire that day, I still bowed my head, just as my grandmother had once taught me.

The months that followed were uneasy, with tensions always simmering along the border, whether from gunfire or breaches. Fear of war's return was constant. Many school days ended abruptly, with parents rushing to collect their children before things escalated. Rare were the times we wished to stay for the last class, to complete the school day instead of leaving early in fear of what tomorrow might bring.

As children, we thought of war as seasonal, waiting each year to see if another would erupt. Why we waited, I cannot say; perhaps to prepare ourselves mentally, or to stock up on food, medicine, and shelter in case we were besieged again, never knowing exactly when it would start. I felt the same anticipation at the beginning of the Gaza war on 7 October 2023, when Lebanon was drawn into

the conflict the very next day. This time, though, I could not tell whether our fear came from the uncertainty of war, or from a numb familiarity born of past battles. In southern Lebanon, we lived through the first months of this war as though nothing had changed. Of course, livelihoods suffered, schools closed, and some families fled, but most of us stayed in our homes during that initial stage.

This war dragged on longer than the 2006 conflict. Approaching its first anniversary, its end remained unclear. But as events grew heavier and more dangerous, the memories of July 2006 returned, and once again, the eldest child was called to act like an adult.

Since I worked in Beirut, I could no longer visit the South. I reasoned that if I returned to Marjayoun, I would be of no real help to my parents, trapped with them under land and air sieges, clutching the pillars of the house as shelling surrounded them, staying awake at night to the grinding sound of tank tracks approaching town. My brother remained with me in Beirut, and the responsibility of caring for him fell on me. Many nights I spent glued to breaking news tickers, trying to learn whether the shelling had reached our home, reaching out to anyone in town to check on my parents.

The war only ended when we were finally able to return, to reunite with our family and loved ones. We went back to our towns at the ceasefire, but the truth is, we had never really left them in our minds; we lived the war from afar as though we were in its very center.

From my grandmother's generation to my parents', a chapter of war shaped the resilient Lebanese spirit that yearned for life. And from my parents to me, another chapter was written—one that forged us, the Lebanese youth, into fighters who struggle to stay rooted in our land. Across

time, we have shared the convoys of displaced families, the crowded homes sheltering strangers, the sounds of tanks, shells, planes, and bullets. And today we ask ourselves: is this truly what we want our children to inherit?

Perhaps the new generation no longer cares for tales of the past, and that is their right, to refuse a legacy of violence and destruction. But our collective memory stretches through history, and ignoring the past brings no benefit. It is from those memories that we draw lessons to carry into our present and future. For my part, I always believed, even as a child, that we would remain safe and peaceful in our land. I also believe that I went through these trials for a reason—that they shaped me into someone who fights, despite the obstacles. Without them, these words would never have been written.

Despite the battles around us, we choose our own fight: to overcome the obstacles of survival and to search for hope in life.

In the end, I say: “A person comes out of war at a crossroads—either to pass the war on to the next generation, or to be strong enough to prevent its return.”