The Land of Lead and Blood

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To be born after a war does not necessarily mean you have survived it; war reserves for itself several generations of delayed victims. But to be born after a "civil" war that is also Lebanese, now that is a tragedy far more brutal and painful. It means inheriting the warlords and the justifications for their battles, passed down from one generation to the next.

My own birth, ten years after the ceasefire, did not prevent the war's legacy from being the earliest memory of my childhood: two Kalashnikov rifles, a mortar shell, and a bullet hole in the door of an old wardrobe. That trinity was all my father's family had "gained" from the Communist tide in the country. The mortar shell became my favorite toy, strategically placed at the entrance of our house in one of the most wretched quarters of the southern suburb of Beirut. According to my father, that place once bore neither its present name nor its misery until the war branded it so.

Perhaps with that shell I compensated for not being able to play with flowers, which were considered alien, even suspicious, in our neighborhood. I saw in its blades what children usually see in the petals of a blooming rose. I believe that, with the imagination of a child, I wove a bond with this object that had crashed into my grandfather's home in Burj al-Barajneh in the early 1980s. However, I spent summers in the village; though flowers were available there in reasonable abundance, the first thing I did upon arrival was to inspect the two rifles hidden in that bullet-pierced wardrobe, displaced "temporarily" like so many others by the war.

Among my cherished games was another weapon: the "pellet guns" so commonly sold for children, and adults too. The toy pistol was the only "weapon" I could afford from my own resources, while owning a pellet gun, with its greater range and power to hurt my neighborhood rivals, felt like the dream of a poor country yearning for nuclear weapons. It was truly a weapon of deterrence. The "pellet wars" deserve their own story, but I'll borrow one chapter: at home, I

felt a surplus of power—childish, of course—when demanding things from my younger siblings. I recall once pointing my pellet pistol at my sister as we negotiated over her chocolate stash. Needless to say, it was easier to get my share with the pistol in hand.

Gunfire, too, was abundant in the suburb and elsewhere: for weddings, funerals, exam results, a passionate verse of ataaba from Naeem al-Sheikh, or sometimes for no reason at all. I remember one particular phenomenon vividly: the celebratory shooting that erupted during speeches by Hezbollah's former Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah. I no longer recall how it stopped, but I think it was after the early years of the Syrian war. Whenever we heard heavy gunfire then, our first instinct was to flip through TV channels to check whether Nasrallah was speaking, or if the bullets were for something else. Each time shots rang out, I dreamed of one thing only: to graduate from pellet guns to guns that made the same thunderous sounds I heard outside.

And so, between the weapons we reached for and those that reached for us, playing with war's remnants in an atmosphere saturated with war instilled in me a fascination with arms, while also stirring the question: which came first, the weapon or the war? Which paved the way for the other, and which preceded the other in the calculations of the fighters? To be fair, the question was first planted in me by a survivor of the war, who once rebuked my love of guns by saying: "Whoever carries a pistol will see the world only through its barrel." I do not know if he was quoting someone else. But the question could be reframed: if there had been no armed factions, would the "civil war" have happened at all?

The question may seem naïve, since the causes of war were far greater. But the point is not to state the obvious: that wars are fought with weapons. Rather, it is to reconsider the conditional, logical relationship between civil war and armed groups. The question is not about the gun itself, but about armament, and what logically follows in a country whose people have yet to agree on a single identity, or even on their place in the world. It is a question about the role of weapons in shaping the choices of armed groups. In essence, it is a question about the possibility that all that happened might not have had to happen. Not in order to apportion blame among the warlords and their followers, but so that it does not happen again, so that war does not become a tradition among us.

Lebanon's first taste of fire came in

1958, a rebellion—or revolution, as others called it—that exposed the deep division over the country's identity: Arab in its Arabness or Arab in its Westernness. An ideological split at heart. The rift deepened under different names until the point of no return arrived with the Cairo Agreement of 1969, imposed by the same foreign powers at stake in 1958, except this time, the outside had moved inside.

That agreement and the arrival of Palestinian factions in Lebanon brought a surge of arms to the Left, where rifles became cannons and mortars became tanks, confronting a Right that wielded state power as its greatest weapon. Excess arms meant excess power, and together with other factors, this abundance exploded the country in the hands of leftist and rightist militias alike. Here perhaps, we understand why the late Mohsen Ibrahim said "We made it too easy" when reflecting on the war. To his credit, he was one of the rare few who offered criticism of his participation instead of justifications.

So, the question can be rephrased: had it not been for that mutual escalation of arms—regardless of who armed themselves first—would the descent into war have been so easy? Can a militia ever behave as anything but a militia?

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By nature, a militia not only acts as one, it thinks as one. In a country whose political scene is dominated by militias ideologically opposed to one another, their "natural" behavior was precisely what we witnessed in 1975. Thus, the very existence of militias made civil war an inevitable outcome, rendering the resolution of disputes by means other than war harder than war itself. For a militia, every adversary is viewed "through the barrel" of a gun, just as I once saw my sister through the barrel of a pellet gun when negotiating over candy.

In other words, the very existence of weapons can sometimes be enough reason to use them, especially in societies accustomed

to daily, even momentary, encounters with violence and arms. Hence the necessity that the state, and the state alone, must monopolize violence and weaponry as instruments of force.

The most dangerous aspect of the war was that it was fought not for rights, but for ideas. The issue is not to critique one idea or another, but to reject the very principle of fighting for an idea, any idea. This is a call to approach armed struggle, as a collective endeavor, from the perspective of human rights: distinguishing between natural rights, like the right to life, and acquired rights, like the right to establish or preserve a political system.

At its core, fighting can only be deemed legitimate when it is the last resort to defend a violated natural right. Resistance, for example—so often invoked in the war's rhetoric—means defense against an occupier who violates two natural rights: the right to a dignified life that is incompatible with occupation, and the right to self-determination. Under this definition, the word "resistance" cannot be applied to Lebanese fighting Lebanese, since determining Lebanon's destiny is the right of the Lebanese people as a whole, not of a faction. Disagreement over that destiny, over Lebanon's place in the world, does not constitute a violation of rights. To change or preserve a system is an acquired right—a matter of ideas facing other ideas, both sharing the same right to access power. War cannot be a legitimate means to claim that right.

The gravest danger in fighting for an idea is that it pushes the fighter toward one of two extremes: either to search for a sacred idea to fight for, or to sanctify the first idea at hand. For once a cause is cloaked in the sacred, it grants absolute legitimacy to the war.

As for me, my war record is hardly unique among Lebanese. Every Lebanese man and woman carries a personal history of war. It has become almost customary for us to mark our daily lives by wars. Perhaps it would be useful to invent an official document—a "war record extract," akin to a civil registry, listing each citizen's war data. Or a "clearance certificate" signed by the state and newlyweds before they have children, making them responsible for raising a child in this geography weighed down by weapons and their equivalents.

As for myself, I would add recent entries: the war of 2024, with its weapons depots exploding between homes; new stockpiles of mines and unexploded ordnances, waiting to take lives with a single

misstep; and a rain of stray, sometimes fatal, bullets.

And so, to the trinity of the Civil War and our endless conflicts, I now add a new member: a fragment of a rocket that fell near our village home in the last war. My grandfather's shell, my father's rifles, my own shard. Alongside them, I add another question: if I had chosen differently, to marry and bring a child into this world, would he one day write his own testimony about this war-born family he inherited from me, without having to add yet another weapon to it?

Here, on this land that never truly dreams of peace, except in its fleeting slumber.