

Critical Reflections on Boundaries: My Experience Abroad with Personal and Political Boundaries During the 2024 War in Lebanon

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Abstract

As an individual moving between places, spaces, nations, and institutions, I am learning where my boundaries lie internally as well as externally by assessing which I consider to be fair and applicable or not. I came to question the sense of fairness to exercise self within these spaces during the times of war in Lebanon from September to November of 2024 as I was at the university in the United States. It was a daily challenge to understand the connections between emotional, political, and societal boundaries. The consuming nature of my everyday life, grappling with isolation, invisibility and distrust, revealed to me the complex nature of political boundaries as they segued into personal ones too. This paper is an autoethnography where I explore the question of boundary making at the intersection of personal and political boundaries by reflecting on my experience being physically far from the war in Lebanon, but mentally and emotionally immersed in it.

Keywords: student empowerment, resistance, political hegemony, 2024 Hezbollah-Israel war, boundary-making

Introduction

Born and raised in Lebanon, it has been my home, an imperfect comfort zone, filled with people I love, and a rich culture that has given me a soulful sense of purpose. In 2021, I made a decision to be far away from home to attend university, but this decision though seemingly voluntary, was a forced one as there seemed to be no other choice but to leave due to the economic and political turmoil. Being far away from home has been difficult enough especially when learning how to navigate a foreign place and interact with people's mindsets. However, in the midst of a war, being away was profoundly challenging emotionally and socially. Feelings of displacement, alienation, loss, and silencing were dominating my daily life and doubled the effort that I have had to put in everyday to resist sinking into the culture of passivity and individualism I noticed in my surrounding. Constant triggers developed a sense of fear in me, giving rise to a complex relationship with boundaries within self, others around me and the world. As Edward W.

Said emphasizes “the crossing of boundaries whilst at the same time abjuring the existence of those very boundaries,” (Bhambra, 2006, p1) I recognized the intersection of political and personal boundaries in my life abroad during the war in Lebanon. In fact, this paper is an autoethnography where I explore the process of boundary making by reflecting on the everyday influences, both here and at home, of people and institutions that shape this process.

The War Within: Being Away From Home

September 23rd, 2024, I woke up as I did every Monday at 9AM in my dorm to get ready for my day at the university where I study political science. But that morning was not like the ones before it, as a video of airstrikes precisely targeting and demolishing entire buildings, neighborhoods and regions in the south of Lebanon, was the first thing my eyes witnessed over my phone screen. I was in disbelief and remember having to rewatch the video to make sure I was not being delusional. I called my *teta*, (grandma), first thing as I did every morning to start my day ever since I left Lebanon in 2021. However, as the phone was ringing, my mind wandered off in fear of her being in danger and of my village Kfarjarra in East Saida, Jezzine region, being under attack. She answered at last, and I felt a great relief to hear her voice, but the overall paralyzing anxiety was still prominent. She reassured me that they were safe, but the sounds of the airstrikes, shells, explosions and sonic booms invaded her ears and mind completely, preventing her from functioning normally and slowing her down as she drowned in distress overnight. I called all my friends that day to make sure that they were alive, and with every phone call, tears would engulf me. Every single day was just like that day, to the point where the pattern of phone calls, of worry, of terrified anxiety, of alienation and confusion became my routine. My physical body was in Wayne, New Jersey, United States, but my heart and mind were transported instantly to Lebanon, specifically Beirut and South Lebanon which were being bombarded daily. This muted my surroundings and made everything and everyone in my proximity seem irrelevant.

I spent the next two months, prior to the ceasefire on November 27th, in this state of mental isolation, body dissociation, and confusion of how to navigate daily tasks of my highly demanding life, while feeling and processing my country's suffering as my own. It was almost as if I had new lenses to see the world around me, and nothing or no one was significant enough to engage me, as my soul was elsewhere. Simultaneously, I had to understand the crisis at home, which was challenging from afar, especially with the emerging feeling of betrayal which had taken over me as I grappled with crisis. As a country very familiar with instability, Lebanon as well as its neighboring countries have been in conflict and political turmoil ever since I was born, and even before the time of my parents and grandparents. However, the political reality was normalized when I was in Lebanon, limited to conversations among adults at the Sunday lunch table and talk shows on television. Proudful of our culture of resilience, the Lebanese have coped with difficult times by hosting daily parties at clubs, creating social media viral funny videos, planning the next food destination among friends and resorting to religion for answers which seem unpredictable to the citizen.

However, being far from Lebanon and witnessing its portrayal in the West, specifically being in the United States, was shocking. I had always known the stereotypes and prejudice the West held against Arabs; nevertheless, the latter's direct impact was portrayed during the war. In the global context, the “Middle East” which was once one

of the most culturally rich and expansive regions, has been deemed by the West to be no more than a far-away, desert-like place (Abou Ismail, 2024). Filled with landmines, empty of souls, and dangerous to anyone who dares to approach, the “Middle East” has been made to be impossible to navigate, improve or “civilize” in the western sense. (Piantanida, 2023) Home has been in crisis since its birth and every year a new reason emerges to be the leading cause of conflict. During the war, it seemed clear to me that its strategic location and the greed allowing entitlement to dominate creates divisiveness and perpetuates violence and conflict.

The War Within: Isolation and Alienation

I pressed a pause button on life and pushed all my American friends away in defense, in protection of myself to set clear boundaries on whom I did not want to be surrounded by and the energy of carelessness they brought along. Alternatively, the urgency of the war and my curiosity to understand and deal with my feeling of helplessness and guilt of being distant from my home and loved ones, fueled a drive to read, learn, write and peak my productivity levels in academic work. It was almost as if my purpose and dedication to Lebanon’s nation-building and political reform was reinforced in a more serious manner, blinding me from the physical realm of life, and creating for myself an imaginary world where my path to saving Lebanon from itself was the one and only *raison d’être*. When everything and everyone I loved, who contributed to my formation as a person, was in danger, and the deep sense of belonging and community I hold dear forced me to live daily in fear, there was no other purpose than engulfing self in attempt to be on the battlefield ground, while physically distant and feeling isolated and alienated.

Boundaries were a reoccurring theme in my mind, as I questioned the boundaries I drew with people around me by delineating who my friends, allies, and enemies were. The concept was not just consuming my mind as I attempted to lead a “normal” life, but the daily war, horrific acts, the violence against the people, the destruction of homes and entire villages erased, dominated my everyday life. I asked myself every day: What are the boundaries of war? Are there any boundaries anyway? If so, who dictates them and based on what reference? What about personal boundaries when questioning where my allegiances lie, my sense of loyalty, of political belonging when navigating life in the physical dimension, and the devotion to home that only resides in the mind and heart?

The confusion felt after asking these questions was apparent as daily life became more challenging by the day and the weight of conversation with anyone who I associated with the West became heavier and more triggering. Feeling the overwhelming emotions of danger, repression, suppression, struggling in communication, and being misunderstood were severe impacts of my home being in crisis, my presence in the United States initiating the emotions of defensiveness especially with its reinforcing dismissive discourse of war. War being my reality during September to November, and not simply limited to this timeframe, but having been used to the presence of conflict, it became my life. The need to explain why my voice was worth being heard, its significance and need to be shared was exhausting, yet my commitment to prioritizing human experience as the most sustainable and real approach to reach people, kept me going. Moreover, the impact on self from being raised in disorder, yet a place of love and purpose was apparent to me ever since I came to the United States as my drive was clearly fueled by a desire to understand and attempt to solve the complex political reality of Lebanon while preserving identity.

Significance of Home and Physical Location

My presence abroad during the 2024 Israel-Hezbollah war also allowed me to draw the connection between why here and there matters to me, to recognize that it is my resentment toward the West for contributing to the destabilization of Lebanon throughout history which makes my physical presence in the United States feel unnatural and forced. My displacement from Lebanon, some might view as willful emigration, but for me and most Lebanese, is forced expulsion from home in search of more dignified living conditions and opportunities, which had deteriorated due to corruption and greed. The attachment to our homeland is real for me and a lot of other Lebanese, meaning that when the land is in danger, we can feel it even from afar. Physical location does not dominate or overcompensate from separation from home's land, but often reinforces attachment as it presents another way of life which one might reject, which is my case on some levels. Feelings of invisibility in the United States extended from being in a state of attempting to understand the culture around me while preserving my Lebanese identity in the United States during times of war.

The War at Home: Psychological Terrorism

Sitting by the Mediterranean Sea in Lebanon on a typical summer day in August, I once heard two loud thuds and felt a shake. I saw the kids running and then my father walking toward me unfazed by the sound. Tears in my eyes, I asked him what that was, and he said, "This is psychological terrorism." This term has not left my mind since, nor has the sound of sonic booms, achieving the purpose of the launch of the Israeli war planes, invading the skies of Beirut in 2024, as well as my ears, heart and soul. In fact, Horgan defines terrorism as "a special kind of strategy that uses public violence intended to effect social or political change, but for an act to be reliably categorized as terrorism or terroristic in nature, it must feature the proximate victimization of noncombatants (e.g., civilians) to influence far-more-distant actors (e.g., governments) and agendas." (Horgan, 2017, p199) Those harmed along the way of achieving a greater cause are said to be collateral damage, revealing the dehumanization process prior of terrorism.

If no one is physically hurt by the sonic booms, the questions some might ask is: does a sonic boom qualify as terrorism? Responding firmly, I would argue that sonic booms victimize noncombatant civilians, in their daily life to create a tense environment and pressure a "far-more-distant actor." I ask myself why sonic booms are not considered terrorism, and if it's about the fact that physical harm is not committed, then I can start listing the wiped-out villages of Lebanon, the demolished buildings flattened by one airstrike, due to Israel's advanced precise warfare tactics. However, I soon realized that the word terrorism is not about what happens; it is assigned to "nonstate actors" as "terrorism is often little more than a convenient label with which to categorize acts with which we disagree—if they do it, it is terrorism; if we do it, however, then perhaps it is something else" (Horgan, 2017, p199).

Intergenerational Trauma and the Normalization of Conflict: Toxic Resilience

Moreover, the absence of boundaries during war became apparent as the dehumanization of the community of Lebanese became masked by their own internalized subordination. In fact, with a colonized mind, one is unable to recognize the ability to be autonomous and make the choice to not accept a reality of colonialism and oppression.

This emphasizes how colonial minds trick us into powerlessness and living in defeat, pushing us to accept struggles imposed on us, without setting boundaries in the face of the

oppressor. This was clear during the war in Lebanon, especially in the context of Lebanese abroad as I witnessed their lack of interest, involvement or activism during a time where their nation needed them the most. The normalization passed from grandparent to parent to child was very apparent to me which made the dominating sense of resilience convert itself into toxic submission to harsh and undignified realities. Also, my grandparents sharing with me their experiences of war, fleeing the South multiple times from war, coming back to demolished homes, re-building, and doing it all over again through the course of history – this reality has embedded in me ideas of instability at a young age. This notion of recurrent shared memory my grandparents and other Lebanese co-citizens partake of “matters to our individual constructions of identity, as well as to constructions of collective national identity,” (Drozdowski et al., 2019, p.2). This intergenerational trauma and lack of trust is apparent when the Lebanese people throughout history have not had any time to celebrate differences but were called to be divided in front of the enemy. Not feeling worthy or deserving of better circumstances has allowed this vicious cycle to repeat itself and it lingered in my experience abroad, as we shall see next.

The Cost of Nationalism: Boundaries of Resistance

The question of nationalism and extremism emerged in my mind, as I started recognizing the blurry line between resisting danger as a survival and protectionist mechanism, in contrast to resistance taking the form of “justified” extremism. At home, there were diverging stances on the war, some legitimizing protection of Lebanese land, and others arguing the dangers caused. I started asking myself: To what extent are actions justified to defend self or personal ideology and values? Who sets the standard and at what cost? Looking at the gap in the power dynamic between nations, I felt insignificant as a Lebanese, witnessing the silent world watch the torture of Lebanese land and its people. I recognized the dangers of war in causing distortion and perpetuating ignorance, stemming from the fact that “war and violence are not just theoretical or ethnographic subjects; they are often the conditions of possibility and impossibility” (Mikdashi, 2023, p.2). In understanding this dynamic, I could learn the historical context of the violence as well as future trajectory by reflecting and identifying evolution in history. Cultural narratives shape personal experiences as they impact individuals’ perception of self and culture due to collective historical experiences (Watkins-Goffman, 2006). The influence of historical narratives based on who the story was written by clarifies that “history is often written by the victors but is told through stories.” (Frederick, 2024) Victors’ stories are what is propagated, molding thought and our perception of historical events. I realized that each individual’s opinion on the war was directly linked to historical events which have affected them, shaping their perspective of who has the right to set boundaries and who doesn’t.

Collective Action: How Do We Move Ahead?

As an individual moving and living across national and ethnic boundaries, learning my boundaries allowed me to question my political ideas, national identity, and how they play out on the global stage. During war, the attacks on Lebanon were manifested in me mentally and physically, feeling on defense twenty-four hours of every day. The only safe space I felt was around those speaking Arabic, or who my mind classified as people who have known struggle. I was unable to engage in daily small talk, because I felt the need to be surrounded by people who understood the gravity of the war and its severe impact on my life rather than approach me out of obligation. The war was not a headline for me like it seems to be thought of as when I am constantly approached with the common question of, “are the attacks close to your family?”. Rather, the war created inner turbulence as

it held larger implications on my life, such as the possibility of seeing my parents, my friends, my home, or what seems like an impossible dream of returning to live in Lebanon, and watch my children grow in their land. These boundaries of “othering” (Mambrol, 2016), I subconsciously, and some other times intentionally, imposed led to my realization of boundaries the world might have set to say “enough!”

The mass protests, the social media posts, the events organized around raising awareness, especially in the United States, were very empowering such as the protests in New York City chanting “Hands off Lebanon” as documented by Al Jazeera news. Watching many people risk their lives to use their voice in fighting the dangerous silencing and censorship, fostered by perpetual oppression, was inspiring. In the nation where capitalism and capital dominate all human principles, it was refreshing to witness movements and conversations initiated, albeit very minimal in relation to the gravity of the situation. I recognized the power of protest and resistance and made a consistent effort in speaking up by starting uncomfortable conversations. At the same time, I realized that the diverse approaches to grabbing the world’s attention when addressing a topic that matters could look differently for each person. The method I adopted, for both coping with the realities of war from a distance and also for raising awareness about it, was to start conversations which students and others around me avoided and feared. These discussions instigated discomfort, pushing them to think outside the familiar bubble the United States had sheltered them in.

My leadership positions in student organizations facilitated my ability to convey knowledge to groups of students open to learning and to be pushed beyond their comfortable boundaries towards growth. Also, the courses I was studying provided me with a break from the real world as I engaged with professors and classmates on political urgent matters which helped me feel useful during the war in analyzing it and thinking ahead about reform and the improvement of current deteriorating structures.

At the same time, being in the vulnerable and emotionally exposed state I was in allowed for my emotions to lead my actions, which did not make space for support. The lack of trust in Americans’ intentions suppressed the extrovert in me, because my mind detected the people around me as a daily reminder of my family and country’s danger. Navigating student life in a picture-perfect suburban university campus felt unnatural and almost as if I was hiding from reality. My disoriented mind was unable to separate people from concepts, and, so, it was easy for me to justify blocking all and focusing on my own political research. Studying was my only escape, and a productive way of trying to make sense of my clashing feelings and thoughts. The absence of boundaries with self also arose as I sunk into the victimization mindset after the first month. I recognized my normalization of the daily struggle, the anxious calls to my friends and families, the lowering of my voice and diminishing energy to explain. However, journaling every day reminded me that I could not drown myself in self-pity, and that I had to be proactive in not allowing the oppressor to perpetuate cycles of violence and injustice. Hence, prioritizing education as the only tool I had in my toolbox kept me moving forward and pushed aside feelings of helplessness.

Furthermore, the challenge lay in witnessing the international community, whether in the United States or through the news, be quiet, almost in confusion, distracted from the harsh reality of my homeland’s danger. There was a lack of distinguishment between right and wrong; this lost concept of morality and humanity is often a key factor in what leads nations to allow violence to continue. The absence of political, historical, socio-

cultural, ethnic or religious boundaries with nations of the Levant is not new yet being at an age where my consciousness and vocabulary allow me to better understand and vocalize concepts, it affected me personally to watch my country be viewed as the “other” (Mambrol, 2016), immune to war and deserving of destruction. Even the term “Middle East,” in fact a colonial term, was gaining such a negative undertone in the United States where anytime I had a conversation with any American about it, the first sentence said to me was, “I heard there’s another conflict in the Middle East.” Such utterings undermine and, on a deeper level show how, the resilience of my ancestors, grandparents, parents and I were being taken advantage of by the West to further political agendas at the cost of our physical, mental and emotional safety and dignity. Hence, the spread of the parasite of “othering” (Mambrol, 2016) in the United States, originating from its values embedded in individualism, facilitates adopting dehumanizing views on the “Middle East” as it has been and “will always be” a war zone.

This perception of this beleaguered part of the world as a perpetually conflicted, violent setting removes the human from the equation, which leaves the Arabs proving themselves to the West as capable and qualified, when they are more than equal from birth. As humans with ideas, skills, intelligence, initiative, innovation, souls, smiles and caretakers of a land filled with music, dance, flavor, literature, art and a rich culture, the bare minimum of living in peace and dignity has become a longing. To ask the question of how to build solidarity is crucial to move forward, and it is first done by demanding to break illusionary boundaries which divide people like me and those who have kept us suppressed especially West powers that harbor colonial ideals. This keeps me and resisters in similar positions subject to continuing cycles of dismissiveness. Feeling listened to, understood, heard and seen are a basis for building a strong foundation. Through compassion, unity could sustain relationships and community. To change the discourse, which has been on repeat since I was born, there cannot be fear to speak. This is why I have decided to share my experience, as the most valuable asset toward change is conversation, and the inspiration it may trigger, to influence true transformation.

Conclusion

Being subject to the control of external actors allows the blurring of personal boundaries and destroying target countries, land, quality of life, and people’s ability to live freely. Lebanon as a battlefield for international powers to achieve their geopolitical agendas has made me question if the Lebanese people ever had, individual and collective, power to resist external forces as they have seen wars for more than five decades. Being far away, I am consumed by feelings of anger, betrayal, distrust, and invisibility. Living in survival mode, I pressed pause on everyone and everything happening around me, and resided in my mind, which seemed like the safest, or rather most familiar place to be. There seems to be no separation between mind, heart and body felt while resisting any form of oppression from a distance; preserving cultural identity is a shared struggle among expats from around the world. It is even harder and more heartbreaking when I have to call loved ones to check if they are still alive or learn to normalize the thoughts of never coming back when saying goodbye at the airport.

This autoethnography has sought to capture the process of boundary making in times of war while struggling with the sense of self as a Lebanese expat and the forced interactions with “the other.” Life’s journey is interrupted by deep hurt every day, when such a war is so personal, but acceptance and grace strengthen us through collective acknowledgment to keep learning and contributing to the common good.

I recognize the urgency of self-empowerment to uplift and develop our communities to learn what our authentic selves can be and how boundaries between people and countries affect us. Our personal responsibility lies ultimately in planting the seed aiming in the direction of progress, even if we may not witness the desired change(s) in our lifetime.

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