

Four Women Relate their Experiences in Combat during the War...

Purposes Vary but the Fixation on Gender Equality Remains!

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The war is still a part of each and every one of us. Many endured its brutality, be it due to instability, death, displacement, destruction or the hardship of ensuring daily bread. Many remember it with a shy feeling of nostalgia sometimes, including us, the youth, who were fledglings at the time: how fun were the nights in the shelter when neighbors gathered together; how nice it was not to go to school and instead spend the whole day playing.

It was beautiful in its ugliness; the explosion of this or that shell and what it would do to us. Our hearts would sink with the noise only to climb back up again ready to welcome the next sound. In spite of the ugliness, there was something beautiful about this moment, a feeling no person can experience in a time of peace. Each moment of our life consisted of the eeriest contradictions; life and death, beauty and ugliness; fear and excitement. We would play a game of cat and mouse, a game of life and death with each shell. We would stick our heads out to see its direction and fire, then we would hide those heads in fear of its targeting our innocent courage.

The war, then, broke the routine of our lives, giving us a kiss of life and death each moment. Beirut, at the time, was not a tedious city either; a city beautiful in the

destruction caused by war which was a museum for a widowed woman. But now... This city has turned into Beirut, a modern, new and imaginary memory ... Beirut, the unoriginal. The war made us live a collective memory. How painful this memory was, but it did give us a national identity and a sense of belonging to this country beautiful in its widowhood. We loved Beirut then...

Beirut was not the only female who took part in the war. It was a fertile space for several women who participated in the war for various reasons. This article sheds light on the experience of four women: Fadia Bazzi, Kifah Afifi, Jocelyn Khoueiry, and Suad. It highlights how they rebelled against their traditional roles and chose one of their own, despite society's rejection. Each woman had a different motive to take part in the civil war, the war against Israel, the camps war, or the war against Palestinians.

For Fadia, a member of the Communist Party, the motives to participate in the civil war included her growing up in a house which was akin to a military post on the demarcation lines separating her party and one of the opposing movements, her enthusiasm to participate in the war at age sixteen, her commitment to defending the entity of

the Communist Party “which was threatened by other parties and organizations,” the absence of a government as protector of the Lebanese. “Had I not fought them, they could have reached my house, killing my family and me,” says Fadia.

Suad, a Marxist combatant, was against civil war because she refused to belong to any confession, although she did participate in the resistance against Israel. “Mine is the motive of every patriotic human being,” she says. Suad has been living in fear from Israel since she was seven. The first image imprinted on her mind was that of Israel, murderer of children. “That was long before I knew what Israel was, what its purposes were, and what it took from the Arab countries,” she explains. Suad adds, “My parents forbade me from playing with any toy in fear of its being booby-trapped by Israel.”

Kifah, a Palestinian from the Shatila camp, grew up during the civil war and witnessed the bombing of the camp, which gave her two motives to participate in the civil war and the war against Israel. The first was to fight the internal enemy and the second was to fight the external enemy. “I felt there was not one enemy called Israel,” she comments. “There were several enemies who hated Palestinians and who had a hand in the Sabra and Shatila massacre like the Lebanese Forces, the Phalanges, and Saad Haddad’s group.”

Jocelyn, a member of the Lebanese Phalange, thinks that the civil war was a result of the Lebanese – Palestinian war. “Otherwise, I would not have borne arms and enlisted in the war.” In her opinion, her motives were not con-

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fessional but purely Lebanese, focused on Lebanon’s sovereignty and the security of its people. “The war was not against the Palestinian cause, it was against Palestinians creating a Lebanese cause because of theirs and having a state of their own within ours,” she argues. “We took them in and offered them job opportunities. In return, armed Palestinians threatened the simplest bases of our dignity.”

Jocelyn had another motive to participate fervently in the war and that was to prove that there was no difference between men and women. In addition, her house was located in the Saifi area, where she experienced the events first hand. “I was automatically transported into the scene, particularly after all my female and male colleagues had become involved in the war,” she recalls.

Parents’ and Society’s Stand

Most parents did not accept the participation of their daughters in the war. Society was not more receptive. On the contrary, it was entirely negative, which made these women face some criticism and rumors. Fadia’s parents did not reject the idea because her entire family participated in the war. “My father, my brothers, and I would fight and my mom would prepare the food for us as well as other fighters,” she says. Fadia learned how to use a gun at age eight when her father told her: “You must defend yourself and your siblings, if I were to die.” The only opposition Fadia faced was from the principal of her school who would yell at her, saying: “You should bear your books instead of arms.” Fadia continues: “I would defend myself telling her, ‘When you’re standing on the demarcation lines and your life is in danger, you will be forced to bear arms to defend yourself.’”

At first, Suad’s parents did not accept her participation in the war. “My parents accepted my membership in the Party,” she notes. “But they did not accept my decision to bear arms and fight against Israel.” Her parents resorted to every possible means to dissuade her. Her mother hid her military kit and her father came back from a trip to talk her out of it. But Suad convinced them with one sentence: “Haven’t you missed sipping coffee under the oak tree in our village in the South? This is what I want to achieve.”

Society was not sympathetic with Suad’s decision either. People spread rumors about her that she went out “with the gun on her hip,” that she acted like men, or that she went out at night with this or that man. “This was one of the reasons that hastened my decision to get married, because a married woman is entitled to everything,” she says.

Kifah’s parents did not approve of her participation in the war for fear of losing her as they had lost her martyred

siblings. "I would pretend that I was going to school and go train how to use weapons without their knowledge," she confesses.

Jocelyn's parents were surprised by her decision to participate in the war: "They thought I was practicing how to fire guns as one of several sports I like." But Jocelyn convinced them, saying: "My being a girl does not prevent me from realizing my capabilities and participating in the war." Society expressed its refusal by exaggerating stories about Jocelyn and describing her as a "female ogre who cuts off people's ears."

Fighting from One Corner to Another

Despite numerous battles and various kinds of combat, these women managed to survive. Fadia's first brush with war was at the age of sixteen; her participation lasted a week during which she used her building's roof as her battlefield. Fadia held a position on one corner of the roof and fought the group facing her through an opening in the wall. Her life was in danger each night. However, she almost died one night when her corner on the roof was hit by a B7 shell. The wall collapsed on Fadia and the water tanks exploded. "But I was not seriously injured," she explains. "I crawled through the water to hide in another corner after my corner became exposed."

After the roof was destroyed, Fadia had to use her room as a new battlefield, shooting a hail of bullets through the window and hitting many people. "I was told that what angered the group facing me was not that they were hit," she says, "but that they were hit by a woman." Fadia was not afraid on the battlefield as much as she was excited. After the dust had settled, she tried to resume her life naturally. However, she had to carry a

small gun in the pocket of her pinafore because of threats she received from the opposing group as she went to school.

Suad first ventured into the Marxist political arena at age seventeen. She participated in demonstrations and peaceful movements organized in high school. After spending a month in the "revolutionary service" imposed by the Party upon its members, Suad decided to remain at the Party's base in the South and devote herself to military actions against Israel. "Firearms were heavier than I expected," Suad recalls. She fell on her back the first time she fired a gun. "I would see fighters shudder as they pulled the trigger," she adds. "But I didn't think that the Kalashnikov would push me backwards so hard. That's when bullets whizzed in all directions," she quips.

On her first night fighting, Suad was in charge of guarding an area in the south in case of an Israeli attack. "I was more worried than terrified," she remembers. "I would imagine the trees as armed Israelis." This feeling had more to do with the concern that she would not be up to this responsibility than fear for her own life. "Because I didn't train in the use of weapons a lot, I was afraid of firing at them and not hitting them," she says. In her opinion, the operations she took part in were successful. "I was happy to fight the Israelis face to face," she says. "I felt that I was avenging my people and that was the only way to return to my homeland." Suad's happiness is not due to her hardened feelings but to the excessive sensitivity in each patriotic person. "I would cry if I saw a murdered cat," she says. "But I could step on the head of a dead Israeli. They are our enemies. I saw children who fell as victims in Kana. I lived through the Israeli terror when I was a child. I am distraught not because I killed Israelis but because I know how much they hurt us." Suad had to stop fighting five years later when she became pregnant.

Kifah has been holding in her heart a great grudge since the camps war in 1985, when most of her family was murdered, while others were arrested. "I wanted to stay in the camp to avenge my brother who was murdered, cut into pieces and tossed in the dumpster," she says with sad eyes. "I felt we were homeless and they wanted to take the camp from us much like Israel took our land. I wanted to fight to prove my existence."

Kifah first started fighting when she was fourteen years old. In addition to participating in combat, she contributed through digging trenches and filling sandbags to encircle the camp. She also baked for the fighters, tended to the wounded in hospitals, and washed sheets stained with blood. "I was scared of blood," she admits. "But because I was so angry, washing bloody sheets



Jocelyn Khoueiry

Picture Credit: Darine Al-Omari

became my hobby. I had no home any more. My home was the streets where I would help fighters here and tend to the sick there."

Kifah felt no weakness on the battle field "because death meant nothing to me; it was merely a funny joke." Once she decided to defy death. She and a friend (they called themselves "suffering and alienation") went for a walk around the camp which was under heavy fire. Kifah's arm was wounded, "but I did not die." Kifah was so defiant in the face of death because she couldn't care less about living after losing all her loved ones.

The issue of Martyrdom or *Jihad* gained precedence to Kifah after watching Ezzeddine El Kassem's movie, which addresses the issue of martyrdom. The movie affected her a lot and instilled in her the importance of dying for ones country. Despite the danger, Kifah refused to leave the camp until after it fell. Then, Kifah had to fight the external enemy. She was arrested after attempting to blow up an Israeli bus.

Jocelyn started her weapons training when she was eighteen in the summer camps organized by the Phalange Party. "We paid from our own allowance to get trained," she recalls. Jocelyn's first brush with war was in 1975 – she was twenty at the time. "After several clashes between the Army and the Palestinians, the Party decided to take part in the war due to the government and the Army's inability to fight back," she says.

First, Jocelyn was assigned to guard and surveillance jobs. "I felt it was a game for which I was putting my training into practice," she comments. Then, Jocelyn took part in several operations. She was put in charge of thirteen girls when she occupied for four months a building on the front line called "Al Nizamiyat."

"We occupied the building without permission," she recalls, "because it was used by the Palestinians as a post from which they would target our area. It was insane because we were in charge of protecting an entire area." Then, the building was attacked by armed Palestinians who demanded that Jocelyn surrender. "My choice was to fight back," she proudly declares. "We won and we stayed."

Jocelyn was not afraid of dying during the war. "The craziness of the war did not leave me any time to think about death," she explains. "I would neglect the simplest things about my health. I would not go to the dentist when my teeth hurt because I thought I could die the next minute."

Not Everybody Could Be a Decision-Maker

Fadia was not a decision-maker because of her young

age. She only carried out the orders of the group's Communist leader. Much like Fadia, Suad only carried out military plans "not because I was a girl but because of my lack of experience and knowledge in the correct geographic means to set up an ambush and attack the Israelis, which made it imperative to have guides and experts in charge of planning military operations."

Kifah, who was thirteen when she joined the Palestinian Woman's Union, participated in the Union's meetings, seminars, and activities such as distributing provisions to camps. Kifah refused to merely execute orders.

"Once I planned and executed an operation all by myself," she reveals. Kifah eavesdropped on one of the leaders' meetings as they planned how to deliver provisions to fighters besieged in a location called "studio." "I decided to go all by myself to deliver some batteries and food to the fighters," she explains. "I gathered the food from the camp's houses, I put the supplies in my backpack and I ran, hiding in corners to avoid the sniper's bullets, until I reached the location and delivered the supplies to the fighters."



Suad

Picture Credit: Darine Al-Omari

At first, Jocelyn carried out military orders but she gradually became one of the decision-makers in the war: "The war lingered so we stayed and we assumed responsibilities."

Special Relation Between Male and Female Fighters

Fadia describes her relations with male fighters as "good". They would indulge and favor her. "They would not let me carry a lot of baggage," she comments. "They would offer me food if I were hungry and their jackets if I were cold." Suad also describes her relation with male fighters as great. "I am still in touch with two of my best friends whom I met in war time," she admits.

Kifah also had a "special relationship" with male fighters. "They would not let me execute dangerous and difficult operations," she says. "We would shop for clothes

together and we would buy them alike." As for Jocelyn, she would be bothered by male fighters' excessive concern over her wellbeing. "I wanted to be their equal," she explains. "And I gradually made my way through their ranks. I was happy when they needed me for difficult operations."

Femininity...and the Brutality of War

The war eradicated Fadia's femininity because she felt she always had to do what her male counterparts did. She did not have the chance to deal with her body as a woman because she was a body always prepared to escape and fight. Fadia tried to compensate for her lost femininity after the war, abstaining from wearing pants and boots and replacing them with "more feminine" clothes. "The first time I wore a skirt after the war," she admits, "I felt naked and I tripped." Unlike Fadia, Jocelyn did not think about femininity: "I was so taken by the war and the escalation of events." Suad kept her hair long during the war but she would put it up. "I did not use any beauty products because it was not convenient to rouge my cheeks and go out to fight," she comments. Suad was no different from men except for the fact that she kept more stuff than they did in her military bag such as deodorant, a bar of soap, tissues, tampons and a bottle of water to wash up. "Guys did not care how they answered nature's call. But it mattered a great deal to me." Aside from that, she was not different from the men because she was always veiled and in full military gear. She would only be recognizable as a woman from her voice. Kifah couldn't care less about femininity because she always felt like a man; there was no difference between him and her except for some minor weak points. "I couldn't leave the house when I had my period, unlike men who aren't held back by such things," she notes.

Regret for Some, Happiness for Others

Fadia blames herself for being so immersed in this dirty war. "I speak consciously now," she says. "I'm against the consequences of this war." However, she justifies her part in the war as due to her being brought up in an atmosphere of war to which she had to adapt and even become part of in order to ensure that she would not die. "If I were out of the [war] game," she explains, "that meant that I would be displaced." Fadia could not afford that, either financially or because of her steadfast commitment to achieve the Party's objectives, which she describes as "make-believe." "I left the Party after it fell apart and lost its role," she explains. "I left political life due to the absence of another party capable of realizing my ambitions."

Kifah blames herself for her excessive passion which made her take part in operations, the objectives and nature of which she ignored: "I had so much anger and

rancor bottled up that I needed to release them no matter what." "Once I told a colleague in the camp: 'I wish to fight.'" So he handed her a shell to throw to the other side. "It was my mistake not to know who was on the other side," she admits.

Jocelyn does not regret taking part in the war "because my participation was clean and based on honest convictions." "The proof is that Lebanon remained a country," she adds. In her opinion, fighters have limits they should never cross, failing which they will turn into criminals. "I grew up believing in God and upholding spiritual values in war," she continues, "that's why I fought without being a killer."

War Gave Them Strength ... But Took Away Beautiful Years

Fadia is sad because the war took away the most beautiful years of her life, her childhood, her adolescence, and youth. "I immediately moved to adulthood," she says. "I never lived a day without displacement or instability." However, the war endowed her with personal strength by allowing her to live a new battle each day. "War has no tomorrow," she explains. "A person can die at any moment." The war also helped Fadia understand the political structure of Lebanon, which in turn helped her in her career as a journalist. "The war gave me a personal strength to see myself as man's equal," reflects Suad, who also learned from the war. "It gave me the strength to rise above hardships all by myself, the honor to serve my country, and the conviction to keep fighting without bearing arms."

"The war made me feel deprived and feel that I was an outcast for holding a blue card with the word refugee written on it," Kifah comments. "But it also gave me strength because an easy life no longer meant anything to me. I was born to suffer, and not to live like other human beings."

As for Jocelyn, she says the war reminded her of long wakes, weariness, ideal solidarity, emotional and popular support. "It took away from me times I could have spent in a better way," she reveals. "But it gave me the will not to live recklessly and it positively affected my beliefs. Experiencing hardships, pain, death, and sacrifice makes us better people."

Would they Participate in the War Again?

Fadia would immediately decide to emigrate with her son should war erupt again. "I do not want the war to steal from my son what it stole from me," she explains. "I want him to grow up leading a normal life." Unlike Fadia, Kifah is eager to participate in the war again. "This time my participation would be wiser and more sensible," she asserts.



Kifah Afifi

Picture Credit: Darine Al-Omari

If she were to go back in time, Jocelyn would take part in the war again. "At my age, it is somewhat difficult," she states. She would rather raise awareness among the youth so that secondary causes are not raised alongside that of the country. Jocelyn does not believe that a life bearing arms is ideal for a woman; she is against women always leading a life within a military institution.

From Women in War to Women in Society

After the war Fadia acquired a master's degree in Arabic literature. Today she works as a news bulletin chief in a media outlet. In her opinion, life is like war, be it by bearing arms or fighting to secure one's daily bread in a country that lacks the basic standards of decent living. "To me, life is two wars: One is to ensure a good life for myself and another to ensure a good life for my son," she asserts.

As for Suad, she now fights the Israelis not with weapons but through her work as a member of the

coordination committee in a popular movement, and a member of the campaign to boycott Israel. "We do not all have to bear arms," she believes. "We have other roles to play, particularly as we are witnesses to what's happening in Palestine, what's in the works for Iraq, and Lebanon and Syria afterwards."

Kifah became unemployed after the war and imprisonment, in spite of her wish to become a journalist. "Israelis did not kill our strength and tenacity with imprisonment," she asserts. "They killed our culture because they deprived us of books and culture." After her release, Kifah felt she lacked the required academic and intellectual background to enroll in a university. "I felt that my mind had ceased to work," she says. "Today, nothing is worthwhile except providing a decent life for my son and daughter." She wishes her children will become fighters to defend the Palestinian cause. "My children are Lebanese but their way of thinking is Palestinian," she adds. "My son is only three years old, but he participates in demonstrations. If someone gives him a hard time he calls him Sharon."

After the war Jocelyn completed her studies in journalism and then studied theology for five years. She is currently preparing her doctoral dissertation on "The Virgin." In 1988, Jocelyn as well as a group of former female fighters founded an association called "Al Lubnaniya: The Women of May 31," which she describes as an association that bears the country's message through the family, which is the core of society. "I defended the country during the war," she says. "But now, I am building this country with maturity and positivity."

War's Effect on Women

According to Fadia, war did not give women stability. It made them forget they were women and turned them into fighters, caretakers, or fugitives moving from one place to another to protect their children. As for Kifah, she believes that war did have a positive effect on women as it made them evolve and turned their traditional role as housewives into fighters and active participants much like men during the war. For Jocelyn, women did not use war to ascend to a political decision-making position. "Women in Lebanon do not reach any position unless they wear black and replace their fathers or husbands in the Parliament, Cabinet, or Party."

These testimonies confirm that the motive was common and unique: to rebel against the traditional roles of women which were assigned to them by society, and to prove that women can be men's equal if they so wished.

Translated by Nadine El-Khoury