

Recovering Women's Voices in Post-War Lebanon

Two important historical landmarks passed with scarcely any notice in Lebanon this year. April 1995 marked the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of one of the longest and most devastating civil wars of the twentieth century — or indeed, of any century. The Lebanese war killed more than 150,000 people (most of them civilians) out of a total population of three million. Fighting in various regions of the country led to the displacement of more than 80,000 people, representing approximately one-fourth of the country's population. Thousands of people were permanently physically disabled in the course of the war. Although no accurate statistics exist concerning the percentage of the Lebanese population emotionally damaged by the conflict, it is safe to assume that anyone who experienced even a portion of the terror, brutality, injustice and absurdity of the war is deeply scarred in some way. It will take many years to determine the extent and depth of the war's impact upon the thousands of children born between 1975 and 1990.

October 1995 marked the fifth anniversary of the end of this merciless war without winners. After a decade and a half of carnage, in which every sect and faction fought first against each other, and ultimately among themselves, not a single economic, political or ideological gain emerged which could even begin to compensate for the suffering of the Lebanese people. Interestingly, neither the anniversary of the war's beginning nor the anniversary of its conclusion were officially observed in Lebanon. Half a decade after the end of a futile war which exacted so many sacrifices and consumed so much time, most people prefer to forget about the sixteen years of anguish and move on as if nothing happened. This is an understandable response, but not a wise one. The Lebanese need to remember and come to terms with the war for two reasons: first, to prevent its reoccurrence, and second, to transform its costly mistakes into valuable lessons which might prove useful in hastening the end of other civil wars throughout the world.

To contribute to this process of remembering, learning and healing, the File section of this special double issue of *Al-Raida* examines the Lebanese war and its after-effects through women's eyes. We attempted to take a sounding of the war's impact on Lebanese women of all ages from a variety of backgrounds. Thus, we designed a set of interview questions focusing on women's experience of war, changes in women's political and economic status as a result of the war, the differential responses of women and men to the conflict, women's views on national, confessional and gender identity as a result of their war-time experiences; and Lebanese women's advice to Bosnian, Somalian, and Rwandan women currently experiencing the humiliation, horror and hardships of war. We chose to interview women leaders in various fields, as well as a selection of young college women who were born just as the war began.

In addition, we've included a compelling ethnographic interview of young Lebanese woman conducted by anthropologist Suad Joseph.

In spite of many distinct differences in the points of view expressed by our interviewees, a few common themes emerged which have implications for Lebanese women's social, political and economic roles in the future, most notably Lebanese women's increasingly important participation in the work force. The findings presented in this File section may prove useful for those involved in economic development planning among the worst affected sectors of Lebanese society, particularly the displaced and the physically and emotionally disabled.

During the war, Lebanese women's voices became more prominent than they had ever been before. Women novelists such as Emily Nasrallah, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Daisy Al-Ameer, Etel Adnan and Evelyn Accad (1) transformed the cold statistics and daily sufferings of the conflict into moving stories of humanity's capacity for degradation, compassion, and rebirth. Separated from one another by militia barricades and partitions, these women artists were struggling to make sense of the war from their own particular perspectives — geographic, ideological and sectarian — on the margins of a society and a war in which men, occupying the center, held decisive positions of power. Hence, the literary critic Miriam Cooke described this group of women writers as "The Beirut Decentrists" (2), and considered their literary productions to be not only important documents of the Lebanese civil war, but also a significant development in the history of Arabic literature.

Meanwhile, in the social and political domains of war-torn Lebanon, women such as lawyer Laure Moghaizel, educator Iman Khalifeh, and surgeon Amal Shamma' spoke out bravely and eloquently against the evils of war — often at great risk to themselves, their families and their communities — in their unending search for a resolution to a conflict which killed thousands of innocent women and children. Early in the post-war period, two compelling and frank memoirs about the war experience appeared, both written by women. The first, *Beirut Fragments*, by LAU Professor of Humanities Jean Said Makdisi, offers multiple views of the war's insanity through the varied perspectives of the author, a gifted writer who is wife and mother, intellectual and educator, Lebanese and Palestinian. The other memoir, *Come with Me from Lebanon*, by Ann Z. Kerr, tells the tragic story of the assassination of American University of Beirut President Malcolm Kerr through the eyes of his widow, thereby combining Malcolm Kerr's academic analysis of the war's causes with his bereaved wife's testimony to its costs.

With the exception of the discussion of the recent Beijing conference, women's voices have been relatively quiet in post-war Lebanon. Following the resurrection of the state government and the reconstitution of a central authority in Lebanon, the voices most often heard in public fora are those emanating from the center, and these voices invariably belong to men. In spite of their crucial war-time contributions to the survival of the basic unit of Lebanese society, the Lebanese family, women are

still at the margins. Whether they are activists in non-governmental organizations, scholars, lawyers, artists, writers, educators or physicians, very few women occupy positions of power in the decision-making ranks of post-war Lebanese society or government. Considering the sacrifices they made, the hardships they overcame, and the experiences they gained during the war, women's exclusion from power in the post-war period is a waste of their talents and a loss for Lebanon as a whole.

Although women were often the victims of the war, they were very rarely participants. While men were fighting, women were continually mending and remending a fragile social fabric tattered and torn by massacres, snipers, car-bombs, shelling and displacement. It must be emphasized that, in the vast majority of cases, it was indeed men — Lebanese men, Palestinian men, Syrian men, Israeli men — who were wreaking brutal havoc on Lebanon's civilian population. An honest account of the Lebanese war could, indeed, be subtitled "man's inhumanity to women, children and the elderly," for these vulnerable groups formed the bulk of the war's victims.

The Lebanese war was a war without winners; thus, it was a war without heroes in the conventional sense of that term. It was not, however, a war without heroines. In this special issue of *Al-Raida*, we are proud to present the recollections, views and suggestions of several heroines of the Lebanese civil war. These dynamic, resourceful and courageous women, who are but a representative sample of a much larger group, have a great deal to offer to Lebanese society as it emerges from a long nightmare of death and destruction. These women may also have much to impart to the women who are now picking up the

shattered pieces of Bosnian, Rwandan and Somalian society. Their voices must be heard. Therefore we are placing them where they deserve to be, in the center of our publication.

Laurie King-Irani
Editor

Editor's Note:

Each of the women interviewed in this issue was asked the same set of questions in an effort to facilitate comparative analysis and interpretation of women's views and experiences. Some interviewers chose to present the results in article form, while others utilized the standard interview format.

Footnotes

(1) See *Those Memories*, by Emily Nasrallah; *The Story of Zahra*, by Hanan Al-Shaykh; *Kawabis Beirut (Beirut Nightmares)* by Ghada al-Samman; *Sitt Marie Rose*, by Etel Adnan, and *The Foreman's Fortress*, by Layla Usayran for examples of literature by the Beirut Decentrists.

(2) Miriam Cooke (1987) *Women Write War: The Centering of the Beirut Decentrists*. Oxford: Center for Lebanese Studies.



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