

**Of War, Siege, and Lebanon:  
Women's voices from  
the Middle East and South Asia**

**COALITION FOR SEXUAL AND  
BODILY RIGHTS IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES**

**Texts by**

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Dina Siddiqi  
Zeina Zaatiri**

Compiled by  
Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) – New Ways

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September 2006

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# Introduction

It is often said that history repeats itself. Also that people quickly get used to things which repeat themselves, they stop noticing... Here, in the Middle East —actually when one thinks about it, also throughout the world— it seems like war has been repeating itself *ad infinitum*. And yet, we are not getting used to it... As women, as activists, time and again, we are seeking ways to make our voices heard against the militarist, patriarchal powers bringing forth more oppression, more war, more violence. The consequences of the “global war on terror” in the region have had further implications for us in recent years: Leading to the persistent increase of nationalist, religious right ideologies in the region, it has been forestalling our efforts to promote gender equality; threatening to jeopardize our gains, constraining progressive spaces and marginalizing our efforts.

The idea for this compilation sprung out of our long, sorrowful, yet defiant correspondences on the *Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies* listserv during the months of July and August. As a solidarity network of activists, NGOs and academicians from the Middle East, North Africa, South and Southeast Asia working to promote sexual and bodily rights in our regions, we were all well aware of what the unspoken consequences of the attack on Lebanon would be; how it would resonate as close as Palestine, and as far as Bangladesh; and how for us, activists of peace, human rights, women’s rights, sexual rights in the region, the rope had tightened yet another notch.

Yet we are relentless, and we want our voices heard. Evelyne Accad with her dirge for Lebanon; Pinar Ilkkaracan through her analysis of women’s unyielding resistance to the progressive spaces closing with the perpetual oppression; Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian with the voices of young women from Palestine; Dina Siddiqi by questioning if there is ‘elsewhere’ in this war; and Zeina Zaatari with her solidarity letter to women in Gaza under the bombs flying over Lebanon and account of resistance, are raising their voices on our behalf, interrupting —thus resisting— this appalling repetition...

Liz Erçevik Amado

Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR) – New Ways

# Lebanon, Summer 2006

Evelyne Accad

How to speak of you, Lebanon? How not to speak of you?

How to express the unbearable suffering when faced with destruction repeated a thousand times, more violent and crueler each time? With more capacity for total extermination of humankind each time, the earth crying out its strangulation through suffocating pollution?

How to express our earth bleeding from all its wounds?

How to find words to describe the carnage repeated *ad nauseam*, bodies buried under buildings smashed with fragmentation bombs, phosphorus bombs, depleted uranium bombs, all made in the USA, stones reduced to ashes, sea reduced to a pool of fuel and tar, fish and birds dying alongside the children desperately clinging to their mothers till their last breath.

How can one explain the land taken hostage by men filled with bitterness, thirsty for vengeance, leaving no space for dialogue, no room for negotiation, no prospect for productive exchange with the Other, the different? How to express the struggle between the desire to respond to violence with violence and the deep conviction that such violence will only lead to more revengeful violence until total extermination of humankind?

How to speak of the tearing apart of a beloved country attacked, destroyed, asphyxiated? How to convey the feeling of powerlessness and anger while realizing that the forces of death and destruction had planned this scenario months, perhaps years before; this long procession of deaths and irreparable physical and mental destruction?

I mourn the utter waste of all these lives, amputated, torn apart, killed, sacrificed, but for whom, for what, all these broken lives of a million Lebanese, displaced and fleeing ...

How does one denounce a form of resistance that believes only in its vision of things and does not consult with anyone, without betraying the just cause of the poor and the dispossessed it represents? How can one affirm another form of resistance so necessary in this world: active non-violence?

How can we unite the country to work for peace when most countries, specially the closest ones, are invested in a logic of war?

How can one make the forces of non-violence speak in a world whose only language is violence?

Lebanon, how can I speak of you, you who torment me in what is most human, most beautiful, most noble, most harmonious in me?

How can I make the plurality of my childhood places spring forth once again? How can I brandish its multi-colored mantel of protection against the current reign of fanaticism?

Lebanon, land of the cedar and the olive tree, the orange and apple trees, the terraces of vineyards climbing the mountainside under the sun, a sun all but extinguished now, buried under the dust of pulverized homes, each flattened like a house of cards.

I wanted to scream to the world: “Aren’t you all Lebanese?” when the houses collapsed upon the ill-fated, innocent people of Kana, of the Dahyé and of Ba’alback, when the power plants went up in flames, when the old people were left starving to death, abandoned in the debacle, I wanted to scream: “Aren’t we all Lebanese” just like you had screamed and we had screamed with you: “We are all New Yorkers” when the towers collapsed upon the ill-fated, innocent people of New York and the sky darkened in the asphyxiating fumes and smoke, as if both reflecting and foreshadowing the bombings of Beirut!

I wanted to scream...

But no one seems to be there to listen, to hear, no one seems to be there to see the analogy, the link between all of these world’s miseries intertwined. Few people want to see; Lebanon is a small country, a tiny country geographically, yet so vast in its acceptance of diversity! Yet diversity has no meaning in a worldview where only might makes right, and what can be mightier than the USA/UK/Israel alliance?

What does Israel want? Why its repeated destruction of Lebanon? Is its existence so unbearable?

Is it because Lebanon has found the key to tolerance by blending its various communities in acceptance and respect of each other within diversity?

How can one not see that Lebanon constitutes a solution for our wounded world?

Lebanon, I am hurting with and for you, I hurt from all your wounds, I hurt from the fury unleashed against you. Bound and gagged, you are a hostage to geopolitical circumstances tightening their stranglehold to the point of suffocation.

And the women, the women from Kana, the women from Jenine, the women from Ba’albak, the women from Gaza, the women from Rafah, the women from Dahiyé, the women from Baghdad, the women from Fallujah, some whose menstruation ceased from the shock, others who bled to death, Nadera writes us from Palestine. An analysis of their lives illustrates the rejection of war and of violence; they refuse the form of death foisted upon them and on their future children. They are afraid of this warrior’s world, afraid of the prevailing machismo ready to bleed them dry, afraid to give birth to monsters capable of perpetuating the carnage.

How can we open the eyes of the world’s powerful men to a non-warrior answer to our planet’s woes?

And the women and men from the Civil Resistance: Ayse, Rasha, Huwaida, Samah, Wadih, Rania, and all the others, all the courageous people of Lebanon, and all the others who came from all over the world to join this event; they met at the Martyr’s Square in Beirut, as shells exploded within earshot, to form a peace march that was to make its way to the South with truck loads of food and medicine, with messages of resistance and support to the population of the South decimated by war. In the end, they were not

allowed through but their message will triumph because it is in the heart of all the Lebanese who believe in this hope!

Since time immemorial, the notion of non-violence pervades the consciousness of the people from this part of the world. Gandhi's forms of non-violence are in fact very close to the concept of martyrdom as expressed in the Iranian revolution. The form of martyrdom that drove Iranian Shiites to overcome imperial dictatorship consisted of bearing witness to truth and justice by their deaths. It meant negating within themselves, even unto death, what constitutes the power of the oppressor. It meant exposing the illusion on which injustice is founded, and which gets perpetuated through the compromise of its citizens; to refuse compromise disarms power. Power is powerless in front of non-violence; non-violence overcomes power.

A call to those willing to listen!!

Resist, Lebanon, resist for all of us and for the rest of the world, resist!!

We are all Lebanese. The country of the Cedar is universal, the Cedar is universal. The spirit of peace abolishes the frontiers!

# Is There Anybody Out There?

## Our account of the war in the Middle East

Pinar Ilkkaracan<sup>1</sup>

### **2006: A new war, a new hell**

In July 2006 Israel attacked Lebanon. For years, Lebanon had been a source of inspiration and hope for us activists in the region. As *The Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies*, a solidarity network of NGOs and academicians, we had organized several regional meetings in Beirut since 2002. Each time, we had marveled at how Beirut rose from its ashes like a phoenix in rainbow colors. Lebanon was on its way to become a country of democracy, peace and human rights.

Yet, in July 2006, the Israeli army attacked Lebanon. And we, who had thought only five years ago that we were planting seeds of reform in the Middle East with the creation of our solidarity network —perhaps for the first time— lost our hope for peace, democracy and reforms in our region. While sharing with each other our fear how this spiral of violence might grow thicker and thicker to swallow us as in a nightmare in the future, we tried our best to hide our feelings of helplessness from each other and instead convey our solidarity and love. As Marie Therese, a professor of psychology from Lebanon, expressed for all of us: “I feel every second a big ‘revolt’ about what is happening in my country. Enough is enough. We were more than ever near to peace. And now, peace is so far and I am afraid it will never be realized. I send you all my love and thank you for being there.”<sup>2</sup>

Nadera, a Palestinian academician, was writing from Jerusalem: “It feels so terrible to see Lebanon burning ...people being killed with no mercy...injured, displaced and traumatized..., so please, please be safe, take care of each other...and let us hope for some sanity in this crazy world... What is going on with this world, Why???? Is it easier to turn a blind eye to our pain!!!! Horror is surrounding us...and from here from the old city of Jerusalem I pray for all of you to stay safe, be strong...and keep in touch....for I feel extremely mad, sad, and lost for words, sending you a big hug that hopes to contain some of your pain and anger.”<sup>3</sup>

### **2001: As we thought there was a glimpse of hope in the Middle East**

And it was only five years ago... We believed that for the first time in decades there was a glimpse of hope for peace in the Middle East. For us, women, it meant that it could finally be “our turn.” As representatives of leading women’s organizations and academicians from various countries in the region we were very excited to come together at a meeting titled “Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East,” held in Istanbul in September 2001, which was a first of its kind.<sup>4</sup> Our common vision was that the social and political oppression of the sexuality of women and girls in the region —ranging from the restriction of women’s mobility to honor killings; from FGM to forced marriages— was a major cause of gender inequality, as well as an obstacle to democracy. Decades of war and militarism in the Middle East had not only nurtured the nationalist, fundamentalist and patriarchal ideologies, but also restricted the spaces for liberal reforms and alternative discourses,



including talking about our sexuality. In 2001, we had hoped to reverse this dynamic by creating an opening and founding a solidarity network, *The Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies*<sup>5</sup> to promote sexual and bodily rights as human rights in the region.

Yet what followed for us, for women in the Middle East, was not the peace, but just the contrary: more war, more militarization, more violence. The terrorist attack of Al-Quaida in New York was followed by the launch of the so-called “global war on terror,” which itself unleashed a military attack in Iraq and the attacks of Israel in Palestine and Lebanon. What the increasing violence and militarization meant for us was an unprecedented expansion of Muslim, Christian or Jewish religious and nationalistic ideologies, a drowning of existing liberal voices and spaces in the region and an increasingly masculine culture —not only at home, but also around the globe.

Middle Eastern women were exploited blatantly as a propaganda tool in the construction of this new war, “the global war on terror.” The Bush government and its allies kept falsely claiming that one of their main objectives of the quagmire they have created in Afghanistan and Iraq was saving the women from “Islamic fundamentalism,” despite women’s voices telling a totally different story: that the military interventions were in fact destroying their efforts for more gender equality. Women were as loud, but their voices were drowned and did not reach the governments, the global public, the media or the United Nations. Below are just few examples of these voices...

### **2002: From Afghanistan...**

Sima Samar, who entered the first cabinet founded after military intervention in Afghanistan as the minister responsible for women’s affairs in 2001, and whom I have known since 1992 as one of the most courageous and inspiring feminist activists I’ve ever met, was almost in tears during a phone conversation we had three months after she had assumed her post: “They kept telling the world we will save the Afghan women; in fact nobody cares about women. There is plenty of money and funds for everything that is of interest to men, yet when it comes to women, there is not a penny! They gave us only a war torn building for the ministry, which we, as women, renovated with our own hands and resources. Until now, they have allocated me only 25,000 dollars as the budget for my ministry, can you imagine? Millions of girls and women are expecting support in every sense; can you tell me what can I do with 25,000 dollars?”<sup>6</sup>

### **2004: From Iraq...**

While we, as women in the Middle East, had to listen to George W. Bush on television declaring that one of his reasons to attack Iraq was saving the Iraqi women from Islamic fundamentalism – this despite the obvious secular nature of the Iraqi regime for decades —Rashad, the founder of the Women and Knowledge Society of Iraq, a mother of four children, was telling a different story of her experience of the US intervention: “Since the US invasion, the growing military and sectarian violence has forced women back into the home. Today, only ten percent of women can go to work because of the security crisis. And when a husband is killed or imprisoned, the woman has to bear responsibility for the family... Every time we go out, —this is our habit now— when I leave in the morning, I say to my children ‘Goodbye, maybe we’ll not be able to meet in the evening.’”<sup>7</sup> Madre, an international women’s organization, based in the New York reports: “Since 2003, the US

has strengthened conservative Islamic forces in Iraq both directly, by appointing reactionary clerics to the Iraqi Governing Council in 2004, and indirectly, by creating an atmosphere of chaos where such reactionary forces thrive. Meanwhile, US authorities have made no effort to engage with or include progressive Iraqi women's groups in the various governing structures they have installed."<sup>8</sup> The tough and very difficult struggle of the Iraqi women against religious laws – *shariah*, in a country which has been secular for decades, has succeeded only in a temporary victory, and women's struggle against *shariah* is still going on in Iraq!

### **2004-2006: From Palestine and Gaza...**

Only a short time after we had initiated the Campaign for the Reform of the Turkish Penal Code from a Gender Perspective in Turkey in 2002, we were delighted our Palestinian friends were asking for our support for the similar campaign they started on the Palestinian penal code. As our Palestinian friends' campaign was growing... As we were all holding our breaths... *End of scene. Cut to new scene:* The USA and Israel did all in their power to wear down Fatah, mainly through their politics of exclusion of the Palestinian leadership and economic strangulation. Palestinians began to rely on the fundamentalist Hamas rather than Fatah, which could not even provide their most basic needs. In the end, those who benefited from all these games were the fundamentalists. Hamas, which had an Islamist right political agenda, came to power in January 2006, meaning the end of all reform initiatives of the women's movement in Palestine. Clearly, it was not only the Palestinian women who have lost, but all the women in the Middle East!<sup>9</sup>

In 2004, Israel declared that it would retreat from Gaza, which it had been occupying for 38, i.e., four decades. This decision, which was packed as a "historical step towards peace" to the world public, actually meant a tightening of Israel's military and economic control of Palestine, and more military violence and economic deprivation for the community in Gaza. And what was happening to women and girls as Gaza was becoming the world's largest prison under Israel's control? In our friend Nadera's words: "The children, the youth, in particular the female youth, feel they are ignorable castaways. There were so many stories of fear and pain. During one of the bombings and demolitions of houses, young girls ended up having their periods; just out of fear. Some of those menstruating ended up being attacked and excluded by their own family members, to the degree that in one household, all "bleeding" women and girls were situated in the corner, not only because they did not carry hygienic pads (how could they while being displaced and bombed???), but also because the "men" in the family saw them as filthy and impure."<sup>10</sup>

### **2006: From Lebanon**

For years we had admired and supported our Lebanese friends' struggle against fundamentalisms and their efforts to create an exemplary democracy despite the country's extremely complicated ethnic and religious social structure... Yet, when Israel attacked Lebanon in July 2006, we knew the implications of this attack on the determined struggle. As Marie-Therese was telling us: "The situation is completely appalling and despairing, a repeat of some of the worst that Lebanon has had to live and of which we never thought we would see a repeat!!! Yes what can be done in this total madness? Sign petitions? Write letters? Shelter the homeless refugees like my brother is doing in our house in the mountains of Lebanon and wait for the world to wake up?!!!"<sup>11</sup>

But was the world even looking at what was happening? Our friend Zeina was reporting “What I briefly saw on CNN and BBC quickly reaffirmed what I already knew that the ‘embedded’ media was not telling the world the truth about what was happening on the ground. Whereas Israeli deaths were named, listed, and mourned; our deaths remained faceless, nameless and un-mournable. The total annihilation of all infrastructure, bridges, ports, airports, roads, factories, fuel tanks, trucks, schools, clinics, homes, buildings, universities; all destroyed was simply an ‘unmeasured response.’ The hundreds of women, men and children; all civilian, being murdered everyday were not reported. Our lives were of no value; our humanity put in question; our religions accused; our history erased; our struggles distorted.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Who has won the so-called July-war in Lebanon?**

The media throughout the world wrote that it was not clear who won the war in Lebanon. Yet we, as women, we know so clearly who has won and who has lost the so-called July war. We know so well that once more it is the religious extremist, militarist, nationalist, patriarchal ideologies that have won in the long term. And the losers are us, women, activists, those striving for human rights, reforms and gender equality in the region. We had absolutely no chance to participate in the decision making mechanisms that started this war, the decisions which precipitated this war, we were the ones who opposed to it the most, *and yet, we’re the ones who lost our many gains towards democracy, gender equality and progressive reforms we’ve been struggling for a long time!*

The only thing that helped was to know that our friends were in Lebanon, as well as all of us in the Middle East were resisting, and resisting in solidarity! Our partner HELEM, and a gay and lesbian rights organization, assumed the role of coordinating the efforts of a civil platform to assist the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people. Another partner organization, The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women suspended all their other activities and got involved in Humanitarian Emergency Relief Action, concentrating on empowerment of the refugees. Marie Therese was working on a project for the mental health of families and children affected by the war, though she wrote that she was incredibly overwhelmed and about to explode...

As activists in the Middle East, we’ve been working for decades in a very complicated atmosphere, though very successfully, to realize gender equality, democracy and peace in our countries, as well as in our region, despite global wars around oil, gas, etc... But, it seems that so called “global war on terror” has been defeating us in our efforts. Yet, we try to preserve our solidarity, our hope, our love. During the war against Lebanon, it seemed to us that the only power we had were words, so we initiated this collaborative writing project, not sure if words could really help. Our friend Khedija Arafoui, an activist from Tunisia, encouraged us: “It is just so sad that we can create beauty out of chaos and destruction! I do think that words help, just like music. Happiness and despair are expressed in words, in music, provided there are people to convey emotional states in their intensity.”<sup>13</sup> We hope she is right!

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<sup>1</sup> Co founder, Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR), the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights.

<sup>2</sup> E-mail correspondance with Marie Therese Khair-Badawi, July 18, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> E-mail correspondance with Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, July 17, 2006.

**4** For more information on the meeting organized by Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR), see "Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Mediterranean," Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, Newsletter no: 75, April 2002. Available at: [http://www.wwhr.org/id\\_658](http://www.wwhr.org/id_658) (accessed September 2006). For the press statement issued at the meeting, see <http://www.hrea.org/lists/women-rights/markup/msg00013.html> (accessed September 2006).

**5** *The Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies* started out as a solidarity network in the Middle East and North Africa in 2001 and in 2004 expanded to South and Southeast Asia to become a bi-regional coalition.

**6** Personal phone communication with Sima Samar, February, 20, 2002.

**7** Personal communication with Rashad Zaydan, November 12, 2001.

**8** "Women's Rights Endangered," Available at: [www.madre.org](http://www.madre.org) (accessed August 2006).

**9** For further information on the issue, see " Hamas Takes Over, a Madre Q&A," Available at: <http://www.madre.org/articles/me/hamaselection.html> (accessed August 2006).

**10** E-mail correspondance with Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, July 17, 2006.

**11** E-mail correspondance with Marie Therese Khair-Badawi, July 18, 2006.

**12** Zeina Zaatari, "Letter to Gaza and Resistance in Lebanon", in *Of War, Siege and Lebanon: Women's voices from the Middle East and South Asia*, WWHR-New Ways, 2006.

**13** E-mail correspondance with Nadera Shaloub-Kevorkian, July 17, 2006.

# My Voice.....and the Deaf/D Zone

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian

## At War: A Counter-Discourse of Love

It is indeed a very harsh moment in history —our history as feminist activists— when facing the new hegemonic war, the war against us in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and more. Unfortunately, the war is never over for us, neither is women’s and girls victimization. And yet our resilience and agency never cease to amaze me...

I sat here, looking from the window of my house at the old city, wondering, why at war again??? Why? How am I going to protect my girls? And Maro’s wedding is at the end of July? How are we going to make it? What about my family, the work, the children, my friends? With so much confusion I then went to my computer and wrote an email, sharing my despair, but also my way of resistance, my way of creating a counter space to the imperialist colonialist hegemonic one. I wrote: “Isn't it a normal reaction to fight back when one is raped, when one is violated.... The human tragedy in Lebanon, in Iraq and Palestine is appalling... What is going on with this world, Why???? Is it easier to turn a blind eye to our pain!!!! Horror is surrounding us...and from here from the old city of Jerusalem I pray for all of you to stay safe, be strong...and keep in touch....for I feel extremely mad, sad, and lost for words. I really do not know what to do with the anger inside me, what to do with the fact that the world militaristic powers are militarizing our spaces, our places, our homes and are refusing to hear, see and be when loss attacks; when trauma and fear fill the air. But, I know what to do with myself, and try as much as possible to be a window of hope and a source of support to those that are in need for me, and love, and give love...for love is a practice of freedom.”

## Strategies for Living, Thinking, Working: When All Else Fails

In the midst of this war I was working, or to be precise barely working, pushing my self to work. I was working with children in Rafah/Gaza, together with a group therapist, field worker and a researcher....and despite the fascism of the Israeli attacks, children are still hoping, praying and telling us that they are strong. Yes, they are sharing with us their fears from darkness (no electricity), fear from loss- for their friend Huda lost her entire family- their constant anxiety from being attacked again, and their million questions of WHY THIS IS HAPPENING TO US....

And I, I was collecting data for an action oriented study, trying to be with children, learn about their ways of coping... When I asked them to write a letter to the world, they wrote it to Israel- maybe Israel will hear. I asked them to draw for me, and they drew their world; both the militarization of their spaces and their fear, but at the same time, flowers and homes to show their hope and need for safety. I learned a lot from their agency, power and resilience. *I learned how to keep on walking the walk.*

Their victimization and trauma was constantly juxtaposed to their resilience, hope, and agency. For example, Abir a 13 year-old-girl drew two drawings. In the first one (Picture 1), she wanted us to look at birds (they could also be doves) flying in the sky, reflecting her hope and dream for freedom—the freedom to fly safely. Abir’s home was demolished by

the Israeli bombs and she with lived with her family in her school, and she wrote that she hopes that schools will only be for studying, and the homes for living. Are schools in war zones schools (she asked)??? Are homes homes? Are we the same?? She repeatedly mentioned her desire to study in her school- not to live in it- to gain more economic, educational, and professional power, and to become an active and constructive member of society in her search for a safe life. *I learned how to keep on talking the talk.*



Picture No. 1: Abir's First Drawing

Yet, and in Abir's second drawing (Picture 2), she drew a different world, a world that prevents the doves from flying or love from prevailing, she drew a house, the sun, people being killed, resisters attempting to defend the homes... Her two drawings show both the loss and demolition of her home, and the fear that comes along with this, yet also the hope and a clear call for safety prevailing... *I learned never to lose hope.*



Picture No. 2: Abir's Second Drawing

### **Diasporic at Home: Gender and Youth's Ordeal**

The children, the youth, in particular the female youth, feel they are ignorable castaways. There were so many stories of fear and pain. During one of the bombings and demolitions of houses, young girls ended up having their periods; just out of fear. Some of those menstruating ended up being attacked and excluded by their own family members, to the degree that in one household, all "bleeding" women and girls were situated in the corner, not only because they did not carry hygienic pads (how could they while being displaced and bombed??), but also because the "men" in the family saw them as filthy and impure.

Such experiences of physical and psychological displacement and exclusion brought about more pain and trauma for young women and further dramatized their victimization.

Children's need to be contained and understood was so apparent in both the boys' and girls' words, yet girls feared the social stigma of being called names, or defined as mad, filthy, ugly and much more. Girl participants shared with us the hardships young women face in coping with their traumas. Some said that they silence all their fears and internal hardships, fearing social reactions and wanting to protect their parents from further hardship. Some stated that they tell and share their troubles with close friends or relatives. Boys said that they ventilate by, for example, fighting with people, parents and friends, walking alone and running away from everybody, or by participating in political activities that allow them to fight back against the invading powers. Girls described their inability to talk: They sometimes silence their fears and the abuse, but some other times they write about it, they share it with those close to them, they take their anger out on family members, or they start with obsessive cleaning and tidying up.

### **Between Western Imperialism, Israeli Colonialism, Internal Oppression and Gender Discrimination**

*“They all the Jews, the Palestinian authority and the political factions  
—they are all deaf and dumb.”*

These are the words of Manar, a 14 year old young girl who suffers from hearing impairment. She was trying to explain to us her requests from the community and society at large to improve her life as a child with special needs. She started out by telling us: “The situation in the Gaza Strip is very hard. The electricity is cut; the noise of the military tanks is scaring young children as well as adults. Rafah is suffering because it is surrounded from the sea and from the land by the Israeli. The Jews are following us because one soldier was kidnapped, and the Arabs are supporting them despite the fact that they have thousands of prisoners. Neither the West nor the Arabs are doing anything. The political factions are also fighting each other, and our problem is one: They —all the Jews, the Palestinian authority and the political factions— they are all deaf and dumb.”

The girl children suffering from hearing and speaking disability express frustration and fear: they have no schools to teach and educate them, they can't work, and their own families prevent them from leaving the house or going to school. As Ahlam, a 15 year old girl stated “my great fear is not only what is awaiting me in the future, but what will happen to me as a girl, now, tonight, tomorrow and everyday. How do I protect myself as a girl, when I do not have a hearing aid, when I can't tell my own family what happened with me, and when no one understands me. ....I am a girl, I am nothing...I mean I am ‘Maoujodi U Mish Maoujoudi’ (translated into- I am here/ exist and not here do not exist).”

But, at the same time....with all the losses, fear, pain, marginalization and anxiety, young girls are hoping to be physicians, so as to help injured people, to be lawyers, to defend the victims, to be engineers to re-build their neighborhood, to be teachers, therapists and more. When I hear children's voices, *I know that we should keep the faith, and work harder to fulfill their dreams.*

## **Silence.....The Deaf/D Zone**

The dilemmas that we faced throughout and in the midst of the war, started from the first minutes we began working as therapists and feminist activists: Questions such as how could the world be so deaf/d? How could our voices be so politically irrelevant? And how under such humiliation through silencing...how do we talk about work, how to go about collecting data, interview children, talk to service providers about trauma and recovery—let alone whether we could—when each day we needed to face the additional loss of lives, the hardships and the pain? Could we talk to them, work, and do our jobs without referring to what happened on that day —the bombing, the losses, the news? And then how could we talk about and deal with trauma when all we see and face is trauma? How can we the silenced, marginalized, traumatized, fearful, upset, and worried help children? Can the traumatized help the traumatized? Can the muted voices speak??? Assist??? Work?? How? How?

The feeling of the despair and hurt in this war, at this time is very strong. I personally keep asking myself what I can do, how, where...and who will listen to us. We have all been resisting, the Lebanese, the Palestinians, the Iraqi, and more....We are all able to listen to each other, share with each other, feel each other, and even read what each other's eyes mean to say. But, our voices, fears and feelings are politically irrelevant. The world masculine powers take all the colors from our world, so much of our energy, voice, sight, senses. And, here we are, digging up our history/ies with each other, building on the power we have left, and with so much pain, resisting, so we can all exist, as young girls, as women...



# Speech and the Politics of ‘Elsewhere’

Dina M. Siddiqi

In the old days, the Middle East and its conflicts were far removed from everyday reality in Bangladesh. News from the region did not go unnoticed, of course. Israeli expansionism, U.S. double standards and the steady choking of occupied Palestine’s lifelines regularly made front page news. Such reports elicited sympathy and occasional outrage but did not affect life in any practical way.

Times have changed. The first Gulf War drove home a basic reality. In the age of globalization, wars ‘elsewhere’ directly affected lives and livelihoods locally. Bangladeshi migrant workers had forged ties of dependency on Middle Eastern economies; wars and global politics disrupted and sometimes destroyed these fragile dependencies.

Many of us had not been aware that Lebanon was a destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers or that there existed in a remote corner of Bangladesh a place called Lebanon Gram (Lebanon Village). It was so called after its many inhabitants who traveled there to work as housemaids or in the construction sector. After the war started, some of these men and women made their way home with the help of the International Organization for Migration. They brought with them harrowing tales of living in the war zone and nothing else. Most of the maids were owed several years of wages, kept in safekeeping with employers who were either dead or had left the country without paying them. Similarly the construction workers, some of whom had no documents, returned empty handed, to face debts they had incurred to pay for their trip to Lebanon.

Economic implications aside, it is the ‘War on Terror’ that definitively shifted the terrain through which Bangladeshis relate to events in the Middle East. The politics of elsewhere now resonates deeply —often in unforeseen ways— with the state as well as with ordinary citizens.

Bangladeshis responded to Israel’s vicious attack on Lebanon with outrage, trepidation and multiple layers of anxiety. The endless footage of death and destruction, combined with the open complicity of the international community in enabling Israel’s actions, elicited horror and disbelief. On the rights and wrongs of this war, Bangladesh’s otherwise divisive society was united. From roadside tea-stalls to corporate boardrooms, similar sentiments prevailed. However, the strong sentiments expressed in private rarely translated into public acts of protest.

Various rag tag elements of the religious right were the most visible in demonstrating their opposition to the war. For a month, every Friday after Jumma prayers, the congregation at the national mosque in downtown Dhaka held sizable demonstrations, which were duly televised and reported in the media. The right wing appropriated the sentiments generated by the war, and made it part of their greater cause of defending Islam. They invoked the language of Muslim brotherhood and defined the war not in terms of imperialist aggression but as an attack on the ummah —Lebanon’s demographic composition notwithstanding. In this, they merely echoed in reverse the logic of the aggressor.

The entire spectacle was distressing. Yet the muted nature of public protests by civil society was not surprising. The organized Left in Bangladesh was effectively decimated long ago. A much pampered right wing fills the vacuum whenever it is expedient. To be fair, some left-wing groups, marginal to mainstream political culture, also held small rallies in the capital. These events featured children prominently, foregrounding the nature of the suffering unleashed by Israel's onslaught. But the July War presented one more instance of how the absence of a strong left-wing movement has opened up dangerous spaces ready for appropriation by conservative elements.

Where were the other voices? Was it because the middle and upper classes have strong ties to global capital and western "interests," so that their personal stakes preclude them from voicing public protests? Are we all inextricably entrapped in the larger web of global capitalism?

An acquaintance suggested that Bangladeshis were in a difficult position since condemnation of Israel could easily be interpreted as support for religious extremism. That, in turn, would be bad for the *image* of the country and by extension bad for its citizens. I found this logic confounding. Since when had support for a people under siege, abandoned by the international community, constituted support for religious radicalism? Why had speech been rendered such a fraught commodity in the 'Age of Terror?' For that matter, ought we to be concerned about national image when the lives of human beings are at stake?

Unfortunately, this is the kind of logic with which one must contend these days. Since Israel's invasion of Lebanon, I've gained a renewed appreciation for the ways in which the rhetorical logic of the 'global war on terror' informs the structure of local discourse. How does one challenge the terms of debate that are set by those in power?

The Bangladeshi state is currently a side player in the ongoing drama of the global fight against terrorism. From the possibility of special trade concessions to the security concerns of international capital, much hinges on protecting the image of a 'moderate Muslim' nation. A more cynical reading might see this as the need to prove that *despite* being Muslim – in the dominant discourse a condition that presumably carries with it an inherent danger of sliding into immoderation/terrorism – Bangladesh continues to be moderate. Indeed the desirability of maintaining this image gave the government a convenient excuse for denying for many years the existence of religious militancy in the country.

In the circumstances, the most casual act of solidarity can be fraught with complexity. In early August, a junior Communications Minister inaugurated a new bridge in southern Bangladesh. Perhaps sensing the mood of his constituency, and hoping to garner extra votes in the upcoming national elections, the Minister named it the Hasan Nasrallah Bridge. He attributed his decision to "our love for the Lebanese resistance group. Hezbollah is the only group which is fighting Israel, and the bridge is named after the group as a mark of honour." It is likely the Minister acted unilaterally, and did not think it necessary to get clearance from his superiors. Soon after the ceasefire, the Roads and Highways Department, acting on a directive from the Communications Ministry, hastily renamed the bridge the Hazrat Omar Faruq Bridge. Department officials did not offer any reason for the name change.

What were the implications of this seemingly simple gesture of solidarity? Who was using whom? Some secular commentators argued that rather than lend support to the Lebanese people the naming was calculated to give fillip to religious extremists in Bangladesh. My first instinct was to read into this argument shades of the same (il)logic referred to earlier. Then again, it is true that for Islamists in Bangladesh, the actions of faraway Hizbollah resonate intimately with their actions and aspirations locally. When they said, “We are all Hizbollah,” they meant it quite literally.

Many of us were not even aware of the original name of the bridge. I found out about it from a friend in Beirut, which meant that news of the naming had traveled elsewhere and generated a degree of unanticipated publicity. The ruling party in Bangladesh is already under scrutiny for its dubious alliance with Islamist groups, and has been fending off reports of harboring religious militants. In the attempt to remain ‘Muslim but moderate’, it erased the figure of Nasrallah but found a suitably safe Islamic substitute (Hazrat Omar) as a stand in.\*

How do we disentangle the various layers that mediate responses and social meanings in such a messy reality? Unfortunately, at some level the state’s concerns with image are real enough. Along with the war on terror, we are all implicated in a global war of representation. Few people here want Bangladesh to be portrayed as a hotbed of Islamist militancy. Not just because of our philosophical and political stance but also because of an increasing sense of vulnerability to outside intervention. The tacit support of the international community to the mockery Israel made of national sovereignty —on the pretext of defending itself from terrorist threats— does not bode well for the future. Among other things, it sends the wrong signal to regional bullies. “We could be next” is a thought that has crossed many minds. One effect is that even progressive people occasionally feel compelled to practice self-censorship when it comes to discussing the very real phenomenon of religious extremism in Bangladesh.

This war has rendered transparent relations of power that used to be nominally hidden in the ritualistic performance of diplomacy and democracy. Paradoxically, it has also promoted a culture of silence, fear and hopelessness. Many of us found ourselves reduced to mute spectatorship, literally speechless as we watched the Israeli onslaught unfold on our television screens. In late July, I traveled to Colombo for a meeting of South Asian feminists. There I helped draft a statement condemning the invasion of Lebanon. Our statement did not change anything, but it helped me feel just a little less powerless. I was reminded then that speaking out and reclaiming the terms of the debate is a form of resistance left to us.

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\* To its credit, the Bangladeshi government issued several forceful statements condemning Israel’s actions and the tacit support of the US for the continuing violence. Cynics maintained that the government did so to pacify its Islamist coalition partners.

# Letter to Gaza and Resistance in Lebanon

Zeina Zaatari

On July 12, 2006 Israel started an all out attack on Lebanon using a pretext the capturing of two Israeli soldiers by Hizbullah. It quickly became clear that Israel had been planning such an attack on Lebanon for some time. The media at best talked about an exaggerated response to the capturing of the soldiers but the reality was that the soldiers were quickly forgotten as Israel forged ahead in trying to 'birth the new Middle East' as Rice put it. Hours after my siblings and I arrived at our home in Saida, south Lebanon, the bridges connecting the city to the north and the south were bombed and destroyed. Within few minutes, we are stuck in the city unable to leave and unable to receive any aid or medicine.

On July 13, 2006 I sat to write a letter in solidarity with our sisters in Gaza that had been living under a horrifying siege imposed by Israel, the US and other Western entities that refused to recognize a democratically elected government as it opposed their politics in the region. It was ironic and painful, even then with the war only in its second day yet, to write a solidarity letter while also being at the receiving end of the same militaristic, patriarchal, and oppressive system. Memories of previous wars I had lived through growing up in Lebanon quickly came back alive in my mind.

That day I wrote:

*As I sit here in my parents' home in Saida, a southern city of Lebanon, thinking about the meaning of peace in a world of war, aggression, and injustice. Wanting to write about Gaza, but wondering whether I should write about Iraq and now about Lebanon. As I sit to write a letter that explains the extremely difficult situation of Palestinians in Gaza today, of Palestinians under siege militarily, economically, politically, physically, and medically. Israeli warplanes fly above my head as they continue to bomb civilian targets in Lebanon. Yesterday, a family of nine was killed in Gaza. The father, the mother and the children are all dead. Today in Lebanon, another family is killed as they sleep in their home. The mother, father, and eight children, as young as two months, are all dead. Day after day now for over a month Gazans are not able to work, feed their children, provide medical care, or have any level of normalcy in their lives. Gaza is supposed to have been evacuated from Israelis under the "Gaza disengagement Plan." The reality is that since the pull out, continuous attacks have been the norm. So, I sit here typing these words watching the news and the images of the dead and thinking about the hollow meaning of peace. Peace and democracy have become real dangerous words in our days. Peace is hollow when it does not take into consideration social inequalities, people's rights to self-determination, dignity in living and dying, and freedom and equality.*

*The US and Israel have refused to accept the democratically elected government of Hamas, since it labels it a terrorist entity. As such the western world decided to put all Palestinians living inside the west bank and Gaza under siege. The new bill of the US senate further chokes Palestinians by not allowing for any funding into Palestine that may be under the auspices of the new Hamas government. This includes all sorts of entities, educational and medical institutions, as well as social welfare and services.*

*When over sixty million dollars of wages and expenses that the government would have spent in the Palestinian market and economy is withdrawn every month, how are a people expected to survive? Gaza's situation is even more precarious with one entry point to and from Israel and one other entry point to and from Egypt. When closed, as often has been the case in the past few months, Gaza remains one of the largest prisons on earth. Calls have been coming out for aid for an emergency crisis in Gaza in terms of food shortages and medical relief. The recent bombing of the main power plant in Gaza meant that 1.3 million people are now without electricity in the middle of summer. Bombings that target homes, schools, universities, hospitals and streets do not aim to kill military forces but target an unarmed civilian population.*

*As the world turns a blind eye and a deaf ear towards Palestine, we extend our support and solidarity to our Palestinian sisters as they struggle for their rights and the rights of their children and families for food, medicine, safety and security. We also extend our support to our Lebanese sisters as they huddle their families together in expectation of what may come next.*

On July 15, 2006 we realized the war was going to be a long one. I also realized that everyone I knew in the United States was worried and wanted to know what is happening. What I briefly saw on CNN and BBC quickly reaffirmed what I already knew that the 'embedded' media was not telling the world the truth about what was happening on the ground. Whereas Israeli deaths were named, listed, and mourned; our deaths remained faceless, nameless and un-mournable. The total annihilation of all infrastructure, bridges, ports, airports, roads, factories, fuel tanks, trucks, schools, clinics, homes, buildings, universities; all destroyed was simply an 'unmeasured response.' The hundreds of women, men and children; all civilian, being murdered everyday were not reported. Our lives were of no value; our humanity put in question; our religions accused; our history erased; our struggles distorted.

On July 15, 2006 I started writing daily updates to friends, colleagues, and whoever wants to listen of what was happening in Lebanon. I watched the news on TV, read the newspapers, talked to friends in various parts of the country, went around our city and wrote my observations trying to present the view from what people were experiencing. I told of the work of civil society organizations as they coordinated to help provide resources and aid to refugees and the injured.

When I arrived in the States, I also needed to continue to tell our story to activists and to the general public that usually supports Israel without much questioning. I spoke of the history of Lebanon, of Israel's continued attacks on Lebanese people and soil, and of the work of organizations trying to provide support for refugees. In Beirut, various progressive groups including Helem coordinated efforts in public parks and few schools ([www.samidoun.org](http://www.samidoun.org)), and the Collective for Research and Training in Development-Action (CTRD.A) focused efforts on women's needs in particular during the current crisis ([www.crtd.org/relief](http://www.crtd.org/relief)). In Saida, the municipality worked with NGOs and political parties to ensure refugee needs were met. In Mount Lebanon and the North, the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women, the Lebanese Women Democratic Council, Kafa among others also provided services to refugees from South Lebanon and the Southern Suburbs of Beirut. Thus, civil society organizations played an amazing role during this war in supporting our people and making sure people are able to continue to resist the onslaught against us.

Intellectuals, activists, organizers, professionals and/or artists all signed a letter of support of the resistance. The letter from Workers in the Public Cultural Sphere in Lebanon was initiated by members of Al-Adab Magazine and circulated among largely secular intellectuals and writers (<http://www.adabmag.com/bayaneng.htm>). It received quick support from international activists as well, who added their voices to those of their Lebanese counterpart. The collective of Civilian Resistance in Lebanon also launched a call inviting activists from all over the world to come to Lebanon and travel south in a caravan of support and aid. The call titled Lebanon: An Open Country for Civil Resistance decided on August 12 to gather in Beirut and head south. This was the same day that civil society organizations and political activists in the US were holding their anti-war and support Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq rallies in DC, San Francisco, Los Angeles and many other cities. On August 12, the caravan of 150 people in 47 cars was stopped south of Beirut by Lebanese police from traveling to Southern Lebanon. Nonetheless, members of the Civilian Resistance managed eventually to send the resources south.

At the end of the attack, work continues by all groups to ensure that people whose homes have been destroyed are able to start the rebuilding process. Hizbullah has been coordinating the surveying of damages and ensuring that resources are provided to people. Other civil society organizations have been providing help by setting up solidarity camps in some villages to ensure that resources and medication are received by local villagers and to provide able bodies and minds to help with the rebuilding process. From Saida, the Popular Solidarity Association and the Maruf Saed Cultural Center among others organized such a camp in two villages. The Civilian Resistance also continues its work by providing resources. Members of the group traveled south in several villages provided lunches during a village's funeral, provided resources of food and medication to certain families, and provided constructive means to help children and families cope with the effects of the latest onslaught ([www.lebanonsolidarity.org/](http://www.lebanonsolidarity.org/)). CRTD is already creating programs to address the needs of women who return to their homes having lost all of their means of livelihood. Patriarchal structures may mean that these women do not get credit for the losses they incurred if their homes are not listed under their names or if the land they worked is owned by a rich male landlord. War as well as recovery or reconstruction is all gendered processes that affect women and men differently. It is thus important to pay attention to these nuances as the Lebanese try to put back together the pieces of their lives and as we report and tell our stories of war and resistance.