

My War and His War

by Alia Yunis / LEBANON, PALESTINE, UNITED STATES

Alia Yunis was born in Chicago and grew up in the U.S., Greece and the Middle East, mostly in Beirut during the civil war. Alia writes about two conflicts in the Middle East: the civil war in Lebanon and Palestine's ongoing conflict with Israel. As an adult, Alia confronts what the war in Palestine has done to a ten-year-old boy named Mutassem; understanding his painful experience sends her back in time to her own memories of being a child and then a teenager in besieged Beirut.

Lebanon endured fifteen years of civil war, which began in 1975 and ended in 1990. The country's fragile religious coalition of power-sharing, created when Lebanon achieved independence from France in 1943, was unable to withstand the various religious and secular factions fighting for political control. But Lebanon didn't suffer only from internally driven tension; it was also vulnerable to the conflict raging to its south between Israelis and Palestinians.

Starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth century, Palestinians were dispossessed of land and rights by arriving Jewish immigrants who had likewise been displaced by wars, genocide and ethnic violence in Europe and Russia. As the disputes between Palestinians and Israelis flared into war on several occasions, notably the 1948 Arab-Israeli Conflict and the Six Day War of 1967, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled to Lebanon and settled there as refugees. After being expelled from Jordan in 1970, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) used Lebanon as a base both before and during the civil war to launch attacks on Israel. As a result, Israel invaded Lebanon twice, in 1978 and 1982, and remained in control of southern Lebanon until 2000.

In Palestine itself, violence has been a major fact of life for the last half century. Armies, paramilitary groups, terrorist cells and individuals have all contributed to the ongoing hostility. Children are sometimes the random victims of this violence. Ironically, Alia and the Palestinian child she writes about, Mutassem, did not meet in Lebanon, Palestine or Israel—they met in Los Angeles.



IN THE MIDDLE EAST, the advent of war is as unpredictable as the rain.

Each year the rain is needed desperately, but often it doesn't come. However there is never a drought when it comes to war. Every generation has its war or—quite often—wars.

My first war was Lebanon in the 1980s. Bombings and gunfire, annoying pep talks from Ronald Reagan on the Voice of America, and that Swedish quartet Abba were the soundtrack of my grade-school days into high school. I was young enough that, like all good teen soundtracks, the war played on in the background without disturbing my angst over pimples, weight and boys, especially as the soundtrack became more a part of our lives.

War wasn't yet embedded in us when my brother was eight and I was nine. We were hanging out on the hood of our car with some other kids in the neighborhood. One kid was bragging that he could climb the tree covering up the building across the way when a bullet coming from somewhere on the roof of that building pierced right through the engine of our car. To this day, my brother and I disagree about which one of us was sitting on the hood. He says it was him; I say it was me. While obviously there is some trauma in the memory, I still recall demanding that my mother let us go out and play the next day and being mainly upset because we no longer had a functioning car. I didn't think about how there was almost nowhere left to drive to now that the city had been divided up by various militias.

See, a child can ignore the soundtrack of war—until it blows off his leg and most of his hand. This I learned from Mutassem Abu Karsh. He was ten when we met, the age I was when my first war began. By ten, Mutassem had already heard plenty of the music of war, although it didn't become his main soundtrack until one day when he was playing soccer just outside the two-room house he lived in with his parents and five siblings: Mutassem lost his right leg and four of the fingers on his left hand during an Israeli bombing in Gaza in 2005. The blast injured his brother and cousin who were also playing outside. His brother continues to live with a piece of shrapnel in his head.

Mutassem, then eight years old, was taken immediately to Israel for the amputation of his leg. No one in his family was permitted to accompany him because his Palestinian relatives weren't allowed to cross over. He never complained about going through the amputation without any familiar faces around him. But the amputation was so badly done that when he returned to Gaza, it did not heal properly, and he could not be fitted for a prosthetic leg by the doctors there, many of whom

were volunteers. Mutassem had come to accept a life with one leg.

But two years later, the Palestinian Children's Relief Fund (PCRF) stepped in. PCRF is a non-profit organization founded twenty-two years ago by Steve Sosebee, then a recent American college graduate awed by the tragic health conditions and injuries of the children he met on a spiritual trip to explore the Holy Land. PCRF brought Mutassem to Shriners Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, where I lived.

Doctors at the Shriners agreed to do a second amputation that would allow him to get a prosthetic leg. One plastic surgeon even offered to cut into Mutassem's hand to carve out a thumb that would make it possible for his remaining left finger—his pinky—to function, making the hand useable again. All these plans were made without Mutassem's knowledge. He didn't learn of these things until his father escorted him to the Egyptian border, where it took two days of negotiating to get Mutassem across to Cairo to catch the first plane ride of his life, something his father had never experienced.

As a volunteer for the PCRF, I was one of the people who looked after Mutassem while he was in Los Angeles, functioning somewhere between social worker and doting aunt. As we navigated the intimate moments of reconstructive surgery together—the discovery of a new hand, coming out of the anesthetic knowing even more of your leg was gone—the soundtrack of war was no longer on mute in my head.

It had been nearly twenty years since the war in Lebanon. I didn't know it was still the background sound in my head, defining my personality in and out of war. I practically had it on mute, even back then. Once, four friends and I were sitting in the school courtyard under the big tree discussing the prom that would never be when a hail of gunfire landed our way. Instantly, like the experts we were, we each took shelter in a school locker. When Ronnie Hammad, the tallest, told us it was safe to come out, we started talking about the prom again, barely acknowledging the gunfire. We were warriors for normalcy, and, as long as no one was hurt, we kept on going.

Yes, I still get jumpy on the Fourth of July and don't understand the need for firing guns into the air at weddings, as they do here in Abu Dhabi, where I live now. But for the most part I didn't, now or then, consciously think about the war: the curfews; the days without

electricity when the cockroaches would swarm into our hot apartment and crawl over us at night, when we would wish the water would come back so we could shower and boil some for drinking; the constant hum and dance of gun battles, bombs and shattering glass; the sudden disappearance of neighbors; the scores of scared people on the Corniche scurrying to our building to take shelter in our basement during a surprise Israeli air raid; the occasional dead man found on our street. Only Mutassem made me dwell on them, he who had been so much less lucky than I had been.

Mutassem and I hit it off instantly with a shared smile. We even looked alike, so much so that the nurses assumed he was my son. He didn't speak English, but he could get the gist of the conversations when I would explain to the nurses who he actually was. "It's okay," he said to me one time. "You don't have to tell them you're not my mother. If you were my mother, I would still be happy." It was a sincere desire not to call attention to his own story. But it was also intuitive, as if he knew my own sorrow over the absence of a child, although I never would have discussed such a thing with him.

Through him, I began to see a trait I'd carried with me since my years in Lebanon: reading into people's hopes and trials is part of the instinctual survival of war for children. I discovered this was my fate when I started college in Minneapolis a few months after leaving Beirut. I was bundled up in my winter gear at the bus stop, shaking from cold, when a girl not much older than me, a total stranger, said, "You must be on your way to school. I'm on my way to getting an abortion. Do you think that's what I should do?" She began to tell me the whole story of her boyfriend and their tortured relationship. She wasn't the first person in Minneapolis who had used me as her soundboard. But with this girl, I realized that was who people saw when they saw me: the person who would listen to their story and say the right thing. She was shaking too, and I could barely tell what she looked like because her hat and scarf were covering most of her face, but I said something like, "You should do what you can live with for the rest of your life." That seemed to put her at ease. We, the people of war, tell people things that will give them comfort and peace of mind because there is already plenty of fighting in the background music

without allowing another frustrated track to be added. Today, for better or worse, I am the stranger to whom people at the party tell their deepest secrets.

Mutassem's compassion was not an act either. He always engaged people, including doctors, with questions about themselves, asking me to translate. This is what we also learn as children during war—ask about others before you ask about yourself. We are not the center of the universe, which perhaps isn't always the right thing for a child to believe but it is what children of war know. His questions were usually about how many kids each doctor had.

Before the hand surgery, in the pre-op room, the doctor asked me where I would like some skin from his “good” leg grafted in order to create the illusion of a thumb during the operation. “I'm asking you a cosmetic question,” he told me. “Explain to him it's for people who will see him without his pants on.”

I examined Mutassem's “good” leg, a mess of scars from the original injury and from the numerous grafts that had already been done there. Mutassem had had enough surgeries to understand what the doctor's question was, and I suspect he also understood who would one day be seeing him without his pants on. He'd told me earlier that he planned on marrying a Palestinian girl, preferably one from Gaza. I pointed to one of the few small patches of pristine skin on the good leg and looked at him. He nodded and smiled that that would be just fine.

This was the conscious Mutassem, always trying to make things easy for others, not the post-surgery Mutassem.

After the second amputation, Mutassem was in excruciating screaming pain, a pain so severe that at times the strongest painkillers gave him little relief, a pain that made one cry along with him. The doctor had termed the amputation of his leg above the knee as “savage surgery,” because it was such a tortuous procedure that it was only performed as a last resort when there was no other choice.

WHEN THE PAINKILLERS finally kicked in, Mutassem would sit sullen, staring at nothing.

The hospital insisted on sending a staff psychologist to talk with Mutassem. I did not have much translation to do. He would not give her

any responses, let alone the ones she was expecting, questions like, “Do you ever think what happened to you is unfair?” “Do you ever wonder ‘why me?’” He would just shrug, like it was an irrelevant question, and stare ahead. I guessed from her questions she had not been in a war as a child. Then she told him that it was okay to cry and feel bad. He turned to me and said, “Tell her we’re Palestinians. We don’t cry.”

In those words, Lebanon came back to me, as it would at night and during Mutassem’s physical therapy—the voices of parents and teachers telling us that we move forward, we do not fear, at least not visibly, which is why we went to school up until the principal could no longer convincingly define the current round of fighting as only “skirmishes.” The last time before the principal decided to close the school, my mom made us peanut butter sandwiches, a special treat as peanut butter was an alien concept there, and my brother and I walked through the little shantytown between us and the school. Not a soul was to be seen, not even the ladies who were usually sitting outside their one-room houses cleaning lentils. Although we didn’t look up, we knew the rooftops of the tall buildings were lined with men at the ready, machine guns pointing down at the street where we walked. Had we allowed the soundtrack to play louder, we would have understood how vulnerable we were at that moment. Instead, I started screaming because I saw a rat leap out of one of the massive piles of garbage that had changed the landscape and smell of Beirut. I openly—and from the very essence of my being—feared rats, not the war. Salim, an older teen in the shantytown who usually came out to say hello to us on school days, emerged from his hovel and told me to shut up before someone on the roofs thought something was wrong and started shooting. Salem was carrying a machine gun too, but we still qualified all this as no big deal, as our parents and teachers implied.

Mutassem would wake up many times in pain, hallucinating wildly about people coming into the room, people needing his help, people he needed to hide from, fears he would never admit in daylight. Finally there were times when he did get some peaceful sleep.

Looking over in the middle of the night during one of those quiet times, the only light I saw in the room was falling on his crutches, upon which he had hung his *kefiyah*—his Palestinian black and white scarf.