

Introduction

My eight-year old hands held on tight to my mum's sweaty palms under the scratchy bed sheets that she had wrapped tightly around me.

I watched the flickering shadows of the candles up against the hallway walls as she said a little prayer in my ear, urging me to stay silent.

In the distance I could hear the growing rumbles of the Israeli fighter jets as they flew over. The ground trembling with each attack on nearby buildings. The panicked screams of innocent families as they ran for shelter.

This was the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war, also known as the "July War" -- or as we say in Lebanon -- "Hareb Tamouz".

During this time, for 30 days, my family and I were forced into hiding.

With nothing but mattresses and thin sheets in the hallways of apartments that I couldn't even call home, we lived on the edge for each of those 30 days -- unsure which would be our last.

Watching the neighbourhoods that my parents grew up and spent their childhoods in be brought down to nothing but ashes and rubble hearing of the deaths of family and friends announced one after the other on the news like a ticking time bomb
hiding under tables and beds for hours at a time ...

These were a few of many things that no eight-year old should ever have to experience.

Yet here I was.

Here we all were.

For some, this was not the first time.

Those who were not as lucky as I was are forced to go through such ordeals on a daily basis.

Today, I am here to share their story.

Quick Stats

I recently read a quote that the **UNICEF regional director for the Middle East and Northern Africa** shared in an interview.

He said→ “Not hundreds, not thousands but millions of children in the Middle East and the North Africa region have had their childhood stolen, have been maimed for life, traumatised, arrested and detained, exploited, prevented from going to school and from getting the most essential health services; denied even the basic right to play games.”

This stood out to me and hit deep. I look back at those 30 days.

I remember how, at the time, my 8-year old mind was not worried about the next new Barbie anymore -- it was busy obsessing over the idea of death → a concept I hadn't had to actually face or deal with before then.

I remember the occasional hours where we didn't hear any attacks -- those were the hours that my little brother and I used the opportunity of peace and quiet (which was a true luxury at the time) to play all 4 games that we knew with the ONE toy we had → a deck of cards.

I remember the one night we didn't all have to stay silent and hidden in the dark because there was an announcement on the news of a potential cease of fire from Israel -- how my mum celebrated by buying us “farouj” -- my favourite lebanese rotisserie-style chicken from the side of the road.

I remember how my cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents -- who were stuck in southern lebanon for the duration of the war -- were forced to live in the emptiness of their own high school because all of their houses were completely destroyed within the first 3 days.

My entire village (where I am originally from), Kafra, was forced to use a high school campus for hiding because that was one of the few civilian-inhabited places that the Israeli military was not allowed to target.

The same high school they had to sit months after the war.

The same high school their parents went to.

While my parents, siblings and I left the country the minute we could -- they had to relive those moments every time they went to school.

The worst part? It was normal to them. They did it before. Their parents did it. My parents did it. So my question here is ... HOW is it fair that such a lifestyle has become so normalized for these kids?

I Didn't Even Realize I Was Affected

For a short period of time after the war, I did have nightmares. But being an 8-year-old, I soon moved on and didn't have to do much to put it behind me.

However it wasn't until 10 years after, when I left home to come here for college, that I realized just how deep the impact of that experience really was -- and how abnormal going through war really was of an experience.

The **first** of many subtle signs was in freshman year.

I was hanging in my room with my roommate, who had no idea of my past experiences, and we heard in the distance a jet flying in to the Plattsburgh Air Force Base.

I have travelled on many planes since the war, but for the first time I felt a surge of panic at the sound of the flying jet -- the echo of its engine felt like it was haunting my suppressed anxiety..

Another sign was actually during a therapist appointment.

In sophomore year I embraced the idea of therapy as a means to cope with academic stress and anxiety.

Although I never actually felt any underlying anxieties due to my experiences -- the minute I mentioned that I had gone through war to my therapist, an American, she immediately started to hint at potential PTSD symptoms.

This wouldn't have bothered me so much if she was able to detect such symptoms before I shared the experience with her. Unfortunately, she reacted the exact same way pretty much everyone who isn't Arabic reacts when I share my experience -- shock; pity; confusion.

Lastly -- an indication that I was affected on a deeper level was my irrational anger when I heard my photography professor share with the class the emotional and psychological impact the Twin Tower attack had on the entire nation up until today.

Right now, looking back, I understand and I completely sympathize. It's not easy and should NEVER, EVER be easy to hear that almost **3000 innocent people** were killed due to terrorism or any religious-political violence.

But at the time...the only thing I could think of was --

You think HEARING about the deaths of innocent strangers is difficult?

What about all the kids in the middle east who WITNESS mass deaths on a DAILY basis?

The anger overwhelmed me. It confused me. I consider myself a person of empathy and so this anger didn't make sense at the time.

If This Is Me...What About Them?

The reason I am sharing all this with you is not to make you feel guilt

I am sharing this with you because, while it will make you feel uncomfortable, I want YOU to be able to step inside the shoes of someone who has had to experience the things my family and I experienced.

Back then, I truly believed God (or ALLAH) didn't love me and my family -- why else would we go through this?

But now -- I believe that this experience has allowed me to be able to truly take a minute to step back and try to, as much as I can, walk a few miles in someone else's shoes.

I know there is very little that we can do from here but...

What can YOU do?

The next time you read an article or hear something on the news about Syrian refugees, the children of Gaza, or anything in between -- as hard as it is to truly relate to their trauma or even want to deal with the discomfort it entails -- I suggest you do not simply flick to the next channel.

Just pause. Listen to their story. Pray. And be appreciative.

Alhamdulillah, as we say in Islam.

Before I wrap it up ... I just would like to have a quick moment of silence for my great-grandparents, my uncle and all those who lost their lives in the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war and all other middle-eastern conflicts.

Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un.

"We belong to God and to Him we shall return."

Thank you all for your time, your support and your ear.
I would like to end with a quote.

“Yes, I do believe there will be peace in the Middle East someday but for that to happen the antagonists must have greater love for their children than the hate they currently harbour of their enemy.”