Chapel Talk
September 22, 2006
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What defines a third world country? An unstable government? Insufficient vital materials? Or simply the fact that they are accused of being involved in terrorist acts by a world power?

On July 12, 2006, at approximately 10:00 a.m., Lebanese radio stations and channels interrupted regular broadcasting to declare that two Israeli soldiers had been taken captive by Hezbollah, "the seed of God." Being at the beach called "Mazbah Al-Jisr" with my father and two of my neighbors at the time, I was soaking up the sun and blissfully ignorant of Lebanon's fate in the coming days. Leaving at 10:30, we almost collided with my neighbors' mother, Loubna Kobeissi, at the entrance, an unsettled look on her face. We cheerfully greeted her in the overexcited Lebanese way, but she responded by grabbing her children in a tight embrace and proceeded to frantically whisper stirring words to my father in a rapid Arabic. Completely taken back by her behavior, I tried to grasp the meaning of the conversation but all I managed to hear were fragments like "soldiers," "the south," and that word that would haunt us, "consequence."

On July 13, at the metaphorically hopeful hour of dawn, I awoke to the thunder of Israeli planes breaking the sound barrier. The electricity was out so I couldn't turn on the TV to understand the strange circumstances. I was therefore forced to sit quietly, waiting and wondering in a dream-like haze of fatigue. At 5:03, the definite glass-shaking rumble of bombs could be heard and smoke could be seen rising from an airport railway. My father had woken up by then and silently joined me on our balcony. The smell of gunpowder and smoke filled the air in a matter of seconds although our building was 15 minutes away from the airport. The only familiar sound was that of a rooster's, singing its gratitude for the morning. The cries were feeble, but steady, answering the ominous sounds which could not have been less in harmony with the crowing, signifying resistance, and reassuring us of some stability through times of change. So we stood and

watched, along with the many grim faces of our neighbors in their houses, as Israel showed us exactly what it had meant by quote "severe and harsh consequences."

That day, all the bridges in southern Lebanon were bombed. By late afternoon most people had begun to panic, fearing the worst, stocking up on vital supplies, and leaving the stores bare. We ate our meals that day in silence while the latest news blared in the background, interrupted only by silverware clinking on our plates. Despite all the chaos of the day I proceeded to go down to the building's garage where the neighborhood kids and I played soccer and volleyball almost every day. We ranged from the ages of 8 to 17, were all of different backgrounds, spoke different languages and yet bonded as children in the midst of a war, sweating out our anxieties and making political jokes about things we didn't fully comprehend. The Israeli planes flew overhead from time to time as if reminding us of the damage they had done. Instead of retiring when we saw them, it aroused a fierce determination in us to play harder. Our echoing laughter was hollow and high-pitched, sounding more frightened than indifferent.

At 9:26 p.m., Israeli soldiers bombed the gas tanks of the airport. By this time, some of our neighbors who lived on the top floor of the apartment came to stay with us, perhaps thinking that if something were to happen there would be a couple of moments to embrace their children. We watched in horror as an ominous black cloud grew larger and larger, gulping our vision of the sky and the houses round it. Red tracer bullets were shot into the air, aiming at Israeli planes. They rose in an arched line, yielded for a split second before falling and disappearing altogether. A child shrieked nearby and two cats in the garden underneath fled into dark bushes. The *adan* cried out its usual, soothing prayers: *Allah u Akbar* -- "God is greater" -- blocking out the sounds of screams and tracer bullets for a couple of minutes. We turned the TV on to Al-Jazeera Arabic news station so we wouldn't hear how unnatural our voices sounded. More grotesque images of destruction met our eyes. The Lebanese news reporter presented us with the story behind one of the collapsed houses. A family, mother, father, three children and two grandparents had received Israeli leaflets warning them of danger but could not afford to move or transport the elderly grandparents. Their house had crumbled in an instant,

allowing a split second of understanding, but not a word of prayer before they perished. The pictures showed bloodstained concrete and focused on a corpse's hand with a lone tiny flip flop beside it. I imagined the hand was pointing to this pathetic object that was sprinkled with concrete, dust, and blood. Israeli soldiers were shooting at ambulances that tried to transport the wounded to hospitals, the commentator narrated, but they were far too late at that point. Still, in an absurd attempt to restore life some ambulances managed to race through. Our lullaby that night was the sounds of screeching sirens and the radio blaring on the street, spilling its horrific stories into the night air.

By the following morning, most people had fled to Syria or Jordan, and throughout the day attacks continued on the airport and in the south. People in buildings went to check the shelters underground. Ours was unfurnished, just bare concrete, with cobwebs and dust on the walls and floors. It was also extremely dark and damp, with no hope of electricity or beds because the building's finances could not afford it. The central electricity area was bombed, but we didn't notice much, electricity was a luxury most of the time in Lebanon. The news was on as usual but this version was slightly altered, white clouds replacing the usual black vapors. I later learnt that these clouds contained a phosphoric substance, which was illegal by international law, and had done a great deal of damage in the south. The fire at the airport continued to fatally injure its surroundings and would go on for at least a couple of days.

People were being interviewed next on the news station. They were mostly kids who had lost loved ones. A particularly heartbreaking story was that of a young girl who saw each of her family members dead. She herself was badly injured, and with tears streaming down her eyes, she asked why America hated her so much. She asked the question with such childlike pain and a lack of hostility, unlike so many others who were less victimized than she. Ironically, Americans ask the same question about Middle Easterners "Why do they hate us so much?"

During these days two things were engraved into everyone's everyday lives. The monotony of news, political discussions, and fear was one of them. The other was the

way different people reacted to the circumstances. The majority of people in Lebanon were angry with Hezbollah for being so arrogant, but a portion thought Hezbollah was the only group with enough courage to defend our pride. I disapproved of Hezbollah's rash action, but I think that America would benefit if it could understand that Hezbollah is a product of America's own folly. By trying to violently stomp out terrorism, the U.S. multiplied terror, giving birth to products of war, destruction, loss, desperation and hopelessness. Groups like Hezbollah genuinely think they are doing the "right" thing, like America thinks it is doing the right thing by trying to eradicate "terrorism." The line of good and bad is blurrier than that, a fact that both sides have trouble grasping. I was disappointed but not surprised to note that a fresh, raw wave of anger towards the western world and the Bush administration added to the bitterness that was already present.

On July 17, a tsunami hit java. I mourned the fact that the effort involved to wage a war could save many lives, rebuild homes and supply vital materials if directed for a good cause, in addition to the many Israelis and Lebanese it would leave unharmed. The news also revolved around the many foreigners allowed to leave thanks to pieces of paper declaring them citizens of other countries. Lebanese wistfully watched them wave goodbye to the radiant tracer bullets and tongues of flame, serving as materials to celebrate their departure. Faces glowed orange from the firework-like spectacle while Lebanese parents tried to explain to their children why they couldn't go on the five star boat with a swimming pool. A country cannot wage war without inflicting pain and the victims here were mostly the lower class Lebanese who could not afford to leave.

I was told on the day of my departure that I would leave for Jordan. I protested, experiencing a certain urgency I could not explain. A writer described it as being "the feeling of terror, pride, and a connection to a country." A driver took as to Damascus. The ride was a blur of fearful anticipation. Most people either shut their eyes or murmured holy words while clutching their *masbaha*, holy beads of string. In a particularly empty region, we saw perhaps five vehicles bombed. People clutched at armrests until their knuckles turned white.

I have no desire in altering anyone's political views. What I hope to convey is an image of Lebanon's struggle. I don't know of Israel's struggle and cannot present an image of their emotions and actions during the war, but I am sure that it was just as horrific and heart-breaking to experience. Now both sides claim victory, but how much do you value a human life?