

## Afterword: An Ongoing Mass Production of Martyrs and a Stabilised Dystopia

I submitted the first manuscript of my PhD thesis, on which this book is based, roughly a month before 7 October 2023, and I left Beirut for good around the same time. 7 October—that is the date of the violent attack of Hamas on Israeli kibbutzim and the killing of 1,200 Israeli civilians. As a response, the Israeli Army turned the Gaza Strip into an infernal hellscape. Relentless bombing has now taken place daily for more than eight months. Gaza today is an uninhabitable place, with approximately two million residents trapped inside. As of today, at least 37,551 humans have been killed in Gaza; around 15,000 of them were children. 37,551 : 1,200. Does one Israeli life equal 31.29 Palestinian lives?

7 October created a rupture in the region and beyond. In addition to the war in the Gaza Strip, a war in South Lebanon started on 8 October, when Hezbollah began to fire towards Israel in support of Palestine. As in the 2006 War, the two main actors are Israel on the one side and Hezbollah on the other side, but smaller



Hezbollah, 'Martyrs on the Path to Jerusalem', 2024, Online Poster.

groups, such as Amal, the SSNP, and different Palestinian factions, also take part, supporting Hezbollah in this current war. These days, there is daily shelling and bombing, and there are new martyrs each day in South Lebanon. One face after the other appears on posters. There is nothing new in these images; all aspects discussed in this book regarding the sectarian martyr poster are still valid.

The Hezbollah serial format for today's martyrs is olive green and yellow. An ID photograph of the shahid is placed in the middle of the image, superimposed on a keffiyeh with verses from the Quran. Above his head, to his left, we read 'Martyrs on the Path to Jerusalem', a slogan that has already been used during the *Wars*. Above him, to his right, we see the muzzle of a Kalashnikov with a red dot, symbolising a bullet. This symbol brands the shahid as having died in the current war. Below the martyr, the Hezbollah logo, the martyr's name, and another stock phrase that was already used during the wars, 'Shahid al-Mujahed', are visible. In a few cases, a gun is added to the martyr. Some of the shuhada wear keffiyehs around their necks, which are often clumsily photoshopped into the image.

One martyr in the image above is significantly bigger than the other three. He is Taleb Abdallah, a high-ranking Hezbollah military commander, who was killed by an Israeli airstrike in South Lebanon on 11 June 2024.<sup>827</sup> The size of the photograph points to the fact that his death is in a higher position in the hierarchy of martyrdom than that of the other three martyrs, who were ordinary fighters.

Just as during the *Wars*, martyrdom is still gendered. All Hezbollah fighting martyrs are male, but of course, women are also killed in the violence in the South. An example is Sally Sakiki, who died on 13 June when the Israeli Army bombed a house. Also, she is remembered as a shahida, mostly by Amal, as she was a paramedic in an organisation that was affiliated with this party. Like most women during the *Wars*, she did not die while fighting.

The anatomy of the posters, hierarchies, and gender roles remain the same as during the *Wars* among all Lebanese groups involved. Of course, Hezbollah still dominates the martyr discourse, as it is the most active party involved in the current war and has—as of today—lost 350 members, while other groups that take part in the fighting have all together only lost around 61 fighters. In addition, approximately 100 civilians have been killed in the South by now.<sup>828</sup>

<sup>827</sup> For Abdallah's life, see Claude Assaf, 'Who Is Taleb Abdallah, the Hezbollah Commander Assassinated in Jwaya?', 12 June 2024, *L'Orient Today*, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1417115-who-is-taleb-abdallah-the-hezbollah-commander-assassinated-in-jwaya.html#:~:text=A%20Lebanese%20military%20source%20quoted,support%20of%20the%20Gaza%20conflict>.

<sup>828</sup> L'Orient Today, 'Health Ministry: 432 Killed, 95,228 Displaced Since Start of Hostilities in October', *L'Orient Today*, 21 June 2024, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1417919/health-ministry-432-killed-95228-displaced-since-start-of-hostilities-in-october.html>.

However, an in-depth analysis of the martyr imagery of the current war deserves further research. I only want to note that martyr mass production is still flourishing. New shuhada enter the walls and the web on a daily basis and these new posters seem to be a repetition of the previous ones. Like their predecessors who died during the *Wars*—or, after their nominal end, in the South, in Syria, or in Tayyouneh—these new martyrs are spectral ghosts. They are revenants, who died in the past, as well as arrivants, who point to a desired outcome in the future, which is first and foremost Hezbollah's victory over Israel, and we might as well say, Hezbollah's expansion of power in Lebanon.

I wrote the part of this book about the cancellation of the future in Beirut before the current war started. It seems that what I noted has hypermanifested itself since 8 October. A situation that seemed unable to be more hopeless has become forlorn due to the addition of a war. During a 10-day visit to Beirut in June 2024, I had the impression that the crisis had stabilised. The not-getting-better is safeguarded now. The Lebanese Lira is stable (1\$ = 89,000 LL, compared to 1\$ = 1,500 LL in 2019), and for those who can afford it, everything, ranging from medicine to electricity, is available—although at horrendous prices. Beirut has become more expensive than Berlin. Many people are still leaving the country. Fear of an all-out war between Hezbollah and Israel loomed over the city during my visit. If this war does not materialise, things will probably remain as they are. During the time of writing, the crisis was dynamic and unpredictable; now it is static and set. I am not sure which of the two is bleaker. Beirut feels sad, heavy, and dystopic. There is no hope or any feasible perspective according to which the situation will change anytime soon.

And there is no longer a need for images to point to the cancellation of the future. The cancelled future is very present and tangible by itself. The faces of the dead from 4 August have now vanished from the walls. Sometimes the families still stage protests, but in vain—gaining justice is out of reach. However, the collective format of the *thawra* martyrs is still standing on Martyrs Square. Yet, there is no energy in Beirut to fight for the dream they are presented to have died for.

Some of the exhibitions on display during my visit respond to the dire conditions. The show *Don't Stop Drawing* in the *Masrah al-Madina* has drawings by Mazen Kerbaj and Jana Traboulsi. These images, which both artists have created almost daily since 7 October, show the horrors in Gaza and the artists' anger and sense of helplessness regarding this situation. Some drawings also depict the dead of Gaza, whom they label as martyrs.

Also, 4 August is still present in Beirut's art spaces, for example in Sursock Museum, which currently holds a solo exhibition by Charbel Samuel Aoun. One of the works, called *A Breath into a Hole* (2020), includes videos of the artist's performances in the port area. He is making his way through a pile of rubble from the explosion just to plant a plant that is used to treat skin problems; he is sitting in

a claustrophobic underground chamber, which is lit only by a candle, and draws with self-made tools on the walls; finally, he digs a hole into soil. It seems that all these absurd activities of drawing in a place no one can see, digging a hole without any reason, or planting a plant in a highly polluted city, where it has little chance to survive without regular care, are a reflection of Beirut's absurdity. No matter how much effort you put in, things will not change.

The current situation is also addressed in a wall text by Reem Shadid that is accompanying a show of Raed Yassin in the Beirut Art Center. She writes:

The strangeness of the past four years, characterized by heightened levels of wars and violence, anxiety, fear, and instability, have compelled us to confront issues that have simmered and accumulated for decades, shaping the challenging material, emotional, and psychological conditions for our lived experiences. [...] How can we continue to inhabit what feels like a fatally dystopian existence—not as mere spectres or ghosts who evade it—but by clinging to this recurring out of joint sense, with purpose and intentionality despite death's pervasive presence and stealth?