

March 4, 2026

## **Endless Wars Forever**

I was born the same year that Israel became a state. Twenty-eight years later, I celebrated my birthday in the ancient port city of Acre with newly acquainted traveling companions from Germany, Australia, and the UK, all in their mid-to-late twenties. As it was also a leap year, it was my seventh real birthday. That in some strange way reflected my naïveté on this impulsive visit to the Holy Land.

I am not religious, so the trip was not intended to be a pilgrimage. I was simply curious, having followed the details of the Yom Kippur War ten years earlier, when I was first becoming aware of the world at large during my freshman year in college. Yet the trip proved to be a memorable peregrination, criss-crossing the country—often alone, on foot—from the Lebanese border to the Golan Heights, the West Bank of the Jordan River, and the shores of the Red Sea in the Sinai (then still occupied by Israel).

All these years later, having now celebrated twelve additional real birthdays, I am struck by two remarkable sinews of the society that I witnessed back then—apart from so many indelible moments etched into the folds of my memory banks—that were so prominent, yet not fully understood by me at the time. One was the kindness of the older generation who had come to Israel as adults when it was founded, along with

the pride they exuded in their country, and what they envisioned it would become.

The second was the seeming militancy of the younger generation, born in Israel and coming of age during its formative years of turmoil and struggle to claim a rightful place among the nations of the world. The exulted leaders of this generation seemed not to be David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, but Moshe Dayan and Menachem Begin. Unlike the idealistic generation that preceded them—at least, among those whom I encountered—they were not inclined to go out of their way to welcome visitors; rather, their form of patriotism—again, as they represented themselves to me—was one of defiance. A patriotism molded by the endless wars with their neighbors, interrupted only by a brief hiatus now and again. A harsh reality. And that aggressive defense has manifested itself politically, as Israel deepens its occupation of the West Bank and now, it appears, of the Gaza strip. And then there's Lebanon.

I was never able to visit Lebanon. After my seventh real birthday celebration in Acre, I made my way to Haifa, then ventured further north. I wanted to visit Beirut. Once declared the 'Paris of the Middle East'; but that was long before my time. I only got as far as the border, where I was met by a number of young, gun-toting Israeli soldiers. I was interrogated on the road before the barricades that had been erected blocking entry into Lebanon.

There were the same set of questions I'd answered when first arriving in Israel, when I'd been singled out on the tarmac as I exited the plane in Ben-Gurion Airport. "Why have I come to Israel? Who am I visiting? What is my itinerary? How long did I plan to stay? Did I have sufficient money to sustain my visit?" And finally: "Where did I think I was going?"

My answer to the last question that I simply wanted to visit Beirut brought something like disbelief to the countenances of the soldiers. They seemed to be 'saying' nonverbally: "Could he be THAT naïve? Or is he concealing a hidden motive?" One blurted out, almost beside himself: "Don't you know there's a war going on in the streets of that city?!"

Needless to say, I was turned away. And that was as close as I ever got to seeing the Paris of the Middle East that had fallen into a bloody Civil War.

Over the next fifty years, I tried to follow the bewildering and sad machinations of religious-infused strife that overtook that nation. Christian Maronites, Sunni and Shite Moslems, Druze, and the influx of Palestinian refugees. And ultimately the militancy of the PLO, Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran, all aligned against Israel stirring the politics of a Lebanon, that had become the doormat of Middle East conflict, too weak and fragmented to even maintain a viable government.

And this week, the beat goes on. The US-Israeli invasion of Iran has once again spilled over into Lebanon,

and death returned to the streets of Beirut on day one of the War, as Hezbollah sent missiles symbolically in support of its Iranian ally, triggering a typically disproportionate military strike by Israel.

Reports seem to suggest that there's no real end in sight to this new War of Choice. And it's spreading. A dozen or more countries will soon be involved to one extent or another in the conflict. Thousands will no doubt die. We hear the rhetoric of political leaders extolling the virtues of killing, and speak of 'winning,' as if it were a sporting event. And in some quarters, they invoke their respective deity—God or Allah—as if it were a Crusade.

It's futile, I know, to step back and ask yourself seemingly cosmic questions about war and peace. And in so doing I confirm that I'm giving in to my naïveté. But why are humans so combative and self-destructive? I searched for answers from history.

I can find apparent causes: greed, lust for power, religious fanaticism, and poverty—of which the last of these Gandhi proclaimed: "is the worst form of violence." But I find no answers to what gives rise to these seemingly human traits, be they Darwinian or Malthusian in nature. Nor do I find reason for optimism. It's always been this way. Endless wars forever.

— Milton H. Marquis