

# What happened in Israel?

Gub meets with three people who were in Israel at the time of the attacks and asks them what they think about the conflict in the Middle-East.

Interview conducted by Alex Hudson with Professor Norman Fenton, Itamar Kastner and Jacqueline Halperin.



## **Cub: What was it like back in Israel?**

Itamar Kastner: The beginning was a bit of a shock in the fact that we were under attack again. I'm not really sure what happened. My friends had called me up and we were planning a camping trip up north which was cancelled very quickly, and we heard rocket and mortar fire. Throughout the day, we heard more and more about the story: about the soldiers who had been kidnapped, killed and abducted. The first few days and indeed the first few weeks were the most important.

Norman Fenton: The conflict started when Hezbollah, in a completely unprovoked attack, crossed the border into Israel, abducted the two soldiers and killed six others after firing rockets across the length of the border. The conflict escalated when Israel attacked military targets as part of the attempt to rescue the soldiers. Nobody knows where the soldiers are or if they are still alive. In breach of all human rights conventions and international law Hezbollah has never allowed any international body to visit the kidnapped soldiers or even give any information about their condition.

IK: We know that one of the main dangers is up north is from Hezbollah. The first few weeks were made up of counter-attacks in the aim of bringing back the kidnapped soldiers. As the conflict went on, everyone slowly became tired of fighting a war that was predominately funded by outside powers... foreign powers. The outside funding was flowing from Iran towards Hezbollah in order to keep the war going. Israel simply has to cut from its education, welfare and infrastructures budgets to be able to defend itself. Naturally a number of anti-war movements appeared and so on, and naturally as more and more soldiers and more and more civilians were killed, the call for a ceasefire, even without bringing the Israeli soldiers back became louder. Enough people had been dying, on both sides.

It reached a point, where it was too much to take. We felt like we had made the point to the government and the Lebanese people. Personally, a lot of my friends had just finished their mandatory military service, and there was that feeling of togetherness purely because everyone had a brother or a cousin or a friend in the military service. Everyone knew someone who was being called up to reserve duty, either along the border or elsewhere. I can remember watching the news constantly throughout the conflict, flicking between news channels. Rather than studying and preparing to come over to England to begin university, I was finding myself on the internet or in front of the television just to find out exactly what was going on.

## **Cub: How surprised were you?**

IK: It's always a surprise... naturally. Even though Hezbollah had been breaking the rules and keeps crossing lines, you would still not believe that they would try to do something like this, even though they have tried in the past. I am shocked at the extent of the shelling of Israeli cities to hide the kidnapping, and this was very devious. Despite this, there was a feeling that it would happen sooner or later. There were warnings in place that if anyone tried anything like this then the whole area would be dragged into conflict, but this is something Hezbollah had been trying to do for a while, we could go through that.

Hezbollah calls itself the Islamic resistance. Since May 2000, there has been the question 'resistance to what?' and in order to justify its existence, Hezbollah has had to find different things to fight for than just protecting the south from Israel attacks, and so it took up the

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first fought for the land between Syria and Lebanon, which according to the UN belongs to Syria, but that is an issue for them to resolve. Despite this, “protecting the south from Israel attacks” is nothing more than a ruse, as all aggression in recent memory has stemmed from Hezbollah. This is not merely my opinion, as UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701 can tell you.

They also fought to release what they call ‘prisoners’ which are held in Israel. These people are basically terrorists who have been held by the Israeli government. Since the kidnapping of three soldiers and a reserve soldier back in 2000, it was stated that this was their main strength: to kidnap Israeli soldiers and then make some sort of deal, whereby 400 of these ‘prisoners’ were released in exchange for the bodies of these soldiers. These bodies had been badly mutilated and still the deal was made.

Overall, it was a surprise, but when you’ve become so used to rockets being fired from the Gaza strip, you never know where the next bomb is going to come from.

NF: Israelis are continually being attacked by terrorists in the form of suicide bombers and rockets from the Palestinian territories. Hezbollah from Lebanon have also continued randomly to attack with rockets even after Israel withdrew from every inch of Lebanon in May 2000 (as confirmed by the UN). So in this sense the attack and Israel’s response to it was not a complete surprise. Hezbollah, against the UN resolutions, amassed 20,000 rockets and frequently fired them into Israel after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000). So then they take up the issue of the small piece of land between Syria and Lebanon called the Shebaa Farms, which Israel has always been willing to cede to Syria since, according to the UN this belongs to Syria, not Lebanon. But Syria refuses to take sovereignty of the land from Israel, because it supports Hezbollah.

**Cub: What do you think of the reaction of the British public?**

IK: The British public’s reaction as always, along with the global reaction is very important to the Israeli people, we are always amazed about how much we have had to prove ourselves to be right. It is the strangest of scales, where attacking military targets and accidentally injuring civilians, which have ongoing investigations by the Government, are described as being worse than shelling hospitals and schools and hailing this as an achievement. Attacking civilians IS Hezbollah’s outspoken target and ambition, as it is for Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, and every other one of terrorist groups. In fact, if I remember correctly, both Amnesty and Human Rights Watched fiercely condemned Hezbollah’s attacks and catalogued them as war crimes. Naturally we were interested in seeing reactions, both support for it and those who wished to condemn it.

NF: The thing that totally dismayed the Israelis that I was with was this world reaction. Israel was the country which had been attacked, and it’s not even a potential threat from Hezbollah. It was not even about the prisoners. They had already stated that their aim is a destruction of Israel. Israel has been tarred in this way despite the fact that it is fighting a defensive war, over 4,000 rockets fired only into civilian centres in Israel and yet the world is condemning Israel. they were in total dismay. They felt

up in Trafalgar Square and stated ‘we are all Hezbollah now’. This kind of thing was completely bewildering to all of my friends and family in Israel.

**Cub: You were all in Israel at the time, what was it like?**

IK: None of my immediate family were hurt, thankfully. I live not far from Tel Aviv, The main threat in that region was from Hezbollah. It’s such a small community that it was only a matter of time before someone we knew was killed. For me, it was the son of an acquaintance of the family. I’m not going to pretend I was personally hurt worse than I was. There are enough people to talk about that... We had grown up in relative safety, but it was strange looking back on it. You see the house that you grew up in smashed to bits.

Jacqueline Halperin: I spent the summer in Israel. I was over there for three months. It was terrible. A close friend of mine lost a leg. The bombings started in the north and slowly moved south. I think it’s important to remember that these ‘soldiers’; that were being kidnapped were not what you would think as soldiers. These are members of the reserve. These are people who have been leading normal lives and have now been kidnapped by Hezbollah.

NF: It was so strange. The entire north of the country came to a standstill. All shops closed and industry shut down. In fact what the media in the UK did not tell was that more people in Israel were displaced in the conflict than in Lebanon (some 400,000 had to leave the North of Israel). I had planned to spend time with my brother who lives with his young family in a village 30 miles south of Haifa. But the hotel we had booked near Haifa was bombed and we were not allowed to go there. At first my brother felt he was out of the range of the missiles and so was truly shocked when their village started to get bombed; they had to stay continually in the bomb shelters; with two children aged 7 and 3 in the searing summer heat this was unbearable. In the end it was all too much for them and at great expense they had to leave home, like so many others, and come and stay in Tel Aviv which is where we ended up.

IK: It’s strange that you say that because it is something that had never occurred to me. It just seems natural that most people have basements or bomb shelters, especially over the last twenty years. We became so used to hearing an announcement on the radio that there was a minor incident, generally in the north and so we were always prepared to go into bomb shelters.

**Cub: Is this an important issue for students?**

IK: People are often apathetic to things that don’t directly affect them, and I suppose that’s only natural. It’s not our job to say ‘look what’s happening over here’ or draw people to our cause who wouldn’t have been interested. It is only the case that we should inform those who wish to be informed and not leave them to make a decision on only some of the information. The actual facts of the situation surprise both those who support Israel and those who are not. Despite this, I believe that Israel just wants to be left on its own. We have enough problems internally and with our own situation without any other conflict making these internal problems drift into the background.

All I can say is, try to get the facts right, and we would really appreciate your support. Beyond that, it’s a situation that we’re just trying to get through

NF: There is a feeling that Israel is judged by different rules to everybody else. It’s been singled out. Should it be an issue for students at Queen Mary? I’d say yes, providing that a proportionate amount of information about other conflicts where far more killing has taken place, where Muslims are killing other Muslims on a huge scale: Dafur for example where half a million people have been killed. No-one raises a complaint. Somalia now, over there, thousands of people have killed, Kashmir, Iraq even, all these places, there’s a feeling that if it’s Muslims doing the killing there isn’t that political motivation but as far as Israel is concerned, that’s why it gets the publicity, so when this one gets singled out, we feel very threatened and upset.

IK: I would not mind reading any article about any conflict, if someone has been interested and informed enough to want to write one. It does not have to be extreme on either side to be interesting, if some kind of injustice has been felt then it will always be interesting to read. There are so many things that affect this student body because of the diversity. This is the thing I have found that I like most since coming to this university a few months ago. Many people of various creeds, religions and denominations discussing the way different things are portrayed, both with

Israel and in general and so, naturally, these issues should be raised.

**Cub: Are you optimistic about the future of the Middle-East?**

IK: Always. Yes. Otherwise what would we believe in? The conflict can only go on for so long, despite the length of it so far. On a more recent perspective, for the last two years specifically, the problem is it that it is no longer up to us. As you see fluctuations in the Lebanese population from generation to generation and support for Hezbollah grows and wanes, currently the support is very high, and now another Lebanese minister has been assassinated by Syria and Hezbollah. It is always hard, purely because of the last 59 years. There are always cycles of optimism and progress, then this often breaks down for various reasons. Hopefully in my lifetime, I will be able myself to visit Lebanon, it is a good country and they are good people with good music, but once again, it is not always up to us.

NF: Certainly many people (especially the Shias) in Lebanon are brought up to hate Israelis so it doesn’t matter what the rights and wrongs of the situation are they will always blame the Israelis for everything. There is plenty of evidence however, that many people in Lebanon do not share this view. There were half a million people in Beirut protesting against the Syria/Hezbollah role in Lebanon and their attempt to overthrow the Lebanese government.

IK: The reason that I am optimistic is because there are so many people in Iran who remember having friends in Israel. The people will eventually get their say. The Lebanese people I have met here have no problem with me and I have no problem with them, we are friends naturally. I never shy away from talking to them, about academic issues, political issues or just to socialise. There may be people who shy away from me, but that is alright because although they won’t be able to solve anything, I am not being harassed. This is what Israel has been

Many of the opinions expressed in the article are personal ones that may not be universally agreed. We would like to emphasise that these views are not necessarily the views of cub magazine, QMSU or Queen Mary, University of London. For cub’s view, turn to

# LETTERS & COMMENT

## Cub statement

RE: 'What Happens When the Bombs Go Off?' Cub Magazine, November 2006

Firstly, I must state that we do not intend to 'give the growing population of radicals' a platform from which to speak anymore than we wish to offer anyone with an interesting story that is relevant to QM students a platform to express it. It was always cub's intention to run a feature in the next issue from a different viewpoint, not necessarily about the arguments that people have against this article but an article entirely detached from the article this month about an Israeli's view of the conflict. We will of course, print letters we receive about the article in our comment section. I do conclude however, that this idea should have been more clearly expressed at the bottom of the article in question.

When we received the pitch for the article we knew exactly what we were getting ourselves into. Kate Connelly and Malika Barakat are allowed their own political views and they have a right to express them (under the 1986 Education act) and I think it is important to express viewpoints of the QM students. I also think it is important to point out that cub magazine and Queen Mary Students' Union has no view on the RESPECT party. This is why the article was an interview and not a feature. Cub magazine as a whole could not justify a feature where the reader became slightly detached from those writing or the voice of the article itself: there would be too much interpretation and not enough fact to allow the article to be written in the third person. This issue is far too important and far too open to interpretation for cub magazine or the Students' Union as a whole to have an opinion on the matter, further from the opinion that cub magazine supports UN resolution 1701 (in which a plan for sustained peace is outlined).

We never wished to make it seem as if it was an opinion that represented the official view of the magazine, Queen Mary Students' Union or myself. While 'cub' has editorial independence from QMSU, it still has a responsibility to the Students' Union to provide a magazine without political agenda. It is clearly stated that 'this is her personal account of what the conflict was like' about the situation and nothing more. This said, and while I believe whole-heartedly that cub should remain apolitical, it should not shy away from any political issues for fear of controversy. In retrospect, it may have been better to run both articles side by side, though I think both arguments will have more time dedicated to them if they are presented separately.

We do agree that Malika's account is very one sided, but in the same way, a number of the Lebanese population, whether rightly or wrongly, have a similar view of the Israelis. With regard to Malika's comment which compares events in Lebanon to events in World War One, this is a personal opinion. Just as the rest of the article, this is not the view of cub, Queen Mary Students' Union or the university.

A complaint has been made on the grounds that a reader 'find[s] it disgraceful that [we] printed her anti-Israeli sentiments in a University (and indeed a society) which is currently becoming increasingly anti-semitic. Why fan the flames and give extra support to this sort of sentiment?' Religion is never mentioned in this article and while certain elements of religion may underpin the conflict, Malika's views are not expressed through religion in any way.

Cub magazine would like to offer an apology for any offence it may have caused from the printing of the article. We should have stated that Kate Connelly is a member of the RESPECT party and we would also like to apologise for not making our intentions about providing a two sided debate known within the last issue of cub. We would also like to apologise for our comments on the contents page. We wished to humanise the conflict and make readers realise the civilian upheaval on both sides. This did not come across properly and cub would like

**"I understand the right to free speech but this must be exercised in a sensible manner".**

Dear Sir,

I wish to make a complaint about an article in the latest edition of the Cub. The article I am referring to is the interview by Kate Connelly, entitled 'What happens when the bombs go off?'

If you are looking to report on a serious news issue, especially one which is so emotive I would have thought it best to present both sides of the story.

Interviewing an obviously bias and I would even go so far as to say racist individual such as Malika does you no credit. Her interview I found offensive to say the least. Although we will all have different opinions on the war in Lebanon (that is what living in a democracy is all about) I find it disgraceful that you printed her anti-Israeli sentiments in a University (and indeed a society) which is currently becoming increasingly anti-semitic. Why fan the flames and give extra support to this sort of sentiment?

Also for her to compare the war in Lebanon with World War One was ludicrous and showed not only her lack of knowledge but also her ignorance. This was a war which killed several million INNOCENT civilians as opposed to a few hundred or perhaps a few thousand thousand civilians in Israel and Lebanon. The majority of the Lebanese victims were supporters of Hamas - a terrorist organisation.

I understand the right to free speech but this must be exercised in a sensible manner. You have basically given a platform to the growing population of radicals at this University.

I would like to read your response on this matter.

Thank you for you time.

Regards,