

## Light among the Ruins

By Conn Hallinan | September 7, 2006



The images most Americans have of the recent war in Lebanon are of shattered cities, dead civilians, and terrified people bunkered down in basements or picking their way through blasted streets. The carnage of modern war draws the media as ancient battles called forth the Valkyries.

But there are other images—and voices—that most of us do not see or hear on the 6 o'clock news or read in our newspapers.

Yonatan Shapiro, for instance, is a former Blackhawk pilot and co-founder of Combatants for Peace. From his conversations with Israeli Air Force F-16 pilots, he relates, “Some told me they have shot at the side of targets because they are afraid people will be there, and they don’t trust any more those who give them the coordinates and the targets.” He has urged the pilots to refuse to fly “in order to save our country from self-destruction.”

Uri Avnery is the founder of Gush Shalom (Peace Bloc). On August 5, he addressed 5,000 people packed into Magen David Square in Tel Aviv: “We are the few facing the masses that thirst for war, but next month, or next year, every one of us will proudly proclaim: I was here! I called for a stop to this accursed war. And thousands who are cursing us now, next month, next year, will claim that they, too, were here.”

At an August 11 rally in Tel Aviv, Ukrainian immigrant Yana Knopova and Israeli Arab Khulood Badawi led anti-war chants in Arabic, Russian, and Hebrew: “Salaam Na’ami! Kharb La! (Peace yes, war no) Voine Nyet! (No war)”

The 34-day war did more than smash up infrastructure. It blew up a lot of assumptions and accepted truths as well, such as the invincibility of the Israeli Army. Also dispelled was the illusion that wars can be controlled. Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah now admits he would never have captured the two Israeli soldiers if he had known how Israel would respond.

### Face of the New Movement

The war has also reinvigorated the Israeli peace movement with some very new elements. The names “Knopova” and “Badawi” are a case in point.

Yana Knopova, age 25, left the Ukraine in 1995 as a young Zionist. She is currently a psychology major at Haifa University and the coordinator of the Coalition of Women for Peace. Khulood Badawi, age 30, is the



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former chair of the Association of Arab University Students in Israel and now works for a civil rights group.

In an interview with Lily Galili in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, the two talked about what motivates them to try to stop the war and how feminism influences their views.

“The police see Khulood as a natural enemy,” says Knopova, “while in the exact same situation, the police refuse to see me as an enemy. They also live with the stereotype that there are no Russians in the left. Khulood is always dangerous, I am never dangerous; Khulood is a demographic time bomb, I am a demographic hope. This is an approach that regards the wombs of us both in the service of the state, and we will not give them this pleasure.”

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According to journalist Galili, Ashkenazi men (Central and Eastern European Jews) traditionally dominated the Israeli peace movement, but women are now largely leading the current anti-war protests.

“All the elements of this war bring the issues together,” says Knopova, “feminism, social justice, class distinctions, the environment and the occupation. Women make this connection.”

And as the chants suggest, more and more Russian immigrants—normally associated with the hard right—are involved in the peace movement.

What is also different is that Arab citizens of Israel have shown up in Tel Aviv in large numbers. Khulood Badawi sees this participation as a way of healing the deep wound of October 2000, when Israeli police opened fire on peaceful Arab demonstrators and killed 13 of them. After the massacre, Arab-Israelis stayed away from peace protests in Tel Aviv.

“The age is over when we would accept Jewish partnership at any price,” Badawi says. “Today the connection is genuine, with Jewish activists paying the price of their participation by demonstrations against the wall in Bil’in, refusal to serve in the military, and activism at checkpoints. We have a common fate, but it is different than in the past. These demonstrations can help us out of the severed relations of October 2000. Now the Arab-Jewish partnership is egalitarian.”

Badawi told *Ha'aretz*, “When we speak from the stage—Yana in Russian, I in Arabic—that in itself is a political message. It also conveys to the Arab world that the claims by Israel and the U.S. that Jews and Arabs cannot live together is a false message.”

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## Dissension within the Ranks

There is also a growing movement among soldiers—particularly reservists—who refuse to serve in the occupied territories or take part in the invasion of Lebanon.

The oldest of these organizations is Yesh Gvul, formed in 1982 during the first Lebanon invasion. It has now been joined by a number of new organizations, like Combatants for Peace, all tied together by the Refuser Solidarity Network. Their slogan: “You can’t have a war if the soldiers stay home.”

Yesh Gvul organizers say they have been contacted by dozens of officers and soldiers who say they will refuse service in Lebanon. Among them is Reserve Captain Amir Paster, sentenced to 28 days for refusing to serve in Lebanon, and Staff Sergeant Itzik Shabbat, who refused to serve in the occupied territories because it would free up regular soldiers to fight in Lebanon.

While new groups are springing up, Gush Shalom is still the activist backbone of the Israeli peace movement. Formed in 1993, it calls for returning all the occupied territories (including East Jerusalem), a right of return for Palestinians “without undermining the foundations of Israel,” and mutual security between Israel and Palestine.

The organization has no paid staff and no funding to speak of, and an in-your-face street-theater edge to it. It rebuilds houses destroyed by Israeli occupation forces, fills in trenches dug by the army to isolate Arab villages, breaks through closure barriers,

and harvests olives for Palestinians barred from their land by the army or settlers.

Gush Shalom was the principle organizer of the Magen David Square rally that also drew the Coalition of Women for Peace, Ta’ayush (an organization that fights to release the more than 10,000 Palestinian detainees), Yesh Gvul, the Israeli-Palestinian Forum of Bereaved Families, Anarchists Against Walls, plus political parties like Hadash, Balad, and the United Arab List.

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Conspicuously missing was any formal representation from the leftist Meretz Party, which splintered over support for the war. However, many Meretz members marched, including former Knesset members Naomi Hazen and Ya’el Dayan. And while 5,000 might seem small, a comparable demonstration in the United States would number 200,000. (There are also vibrant anti-war groups within the Jewish community in the United States, including Jewish Voice for Peace and Americans for Peace Now.)

In his closing remarks at the August 5 rally, Gush Shalom founder Avnery talked about

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the bright potential that smashing “accepted truths” can create: “When this madness is finally over, we shall struggle together—Israelis and Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese, Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel—so that we can live a normal life, each in his free state, side by side, in peace.”

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