

Book gives human side of 2006 war

By Delia Habhab—The Arab American News
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DEARBORN—Author Cathy Sultan offers readers a vivid and emotional retelling of Lebanon's July War of 2006 in her book *Tragedy in South Lebanon: The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006*. Through personal interviews of civilians, both Lebanese and Lebanese American, as well as soldiers, medics, volunteers and reporters who experienced the war first-hand, Sultan provides a compelling account of the devastating 34-day war and its aftermath.

Sultan's previous works include the award-winning books *Israeli and Palestinian Voices: A Dialogue with Both Sides*, which tells the story of the ongoing conflict in the region from the perspective of the civilians whose lives are in constant danger; and *A Beirut Heart: One Woman's War*, in which she recounts her experiences living in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war.

Sultan lived through the first eight years of the civil war with her two children and husband, a physician who operated a hospital that treated wounded civilians. She recalls the fear and apprehension her family endured during that period, but says that after watching the devastation that occurred in 2006, their struggles during Lebanon's civil war seemed trivial by comparison.

"Though my body convulsed with each bomb that exploded during the civil war, I never feared for my life," Sultan writes. "During the 2006 bombing raids, people's homes in the south and in Beirut were indiscriminately leveled on top of them, and the smell of their decomposing bodies hung in the stifling summer air for days."

Sultan writes with the raw emotion and intense passion of an individual who has a strong connection to Lebanon and its people.

"I think that there is a spirit and a passion that comes through in the writing of someone who has actually lived through the civil war," Sultan said in an interview earlier this week. "There is a depth of feeling there that does not exist with writers who are simply reporting on events. Because of my experiences, I can truly understand what the people of Lebanon felt in July of 2006."

Sultan conveys the feelings of helplessness and anger expressed by civilians who have lived through years of instability and fear.

"I feel that it is extremely important that the voices of these people are heard," Sultan stated. "It is imperative that the American people understand that there are people on both sides of the conflict who have suffered and continue to suffer."

"The people I met while putting this book together were both positively responsive and appreciative of individuals who are willing to let them be heard in an international arena," she continued. "The civilians want to speak out, because that is the only way their stories can be told."

Sultan goes beyond the retelling of personal narratives in her book by detailing the historical events that led up to the 2006 war, which date back to the 1968 border disputes between the Israeli Army and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Through this in-depth historical timeline, *Tragedy in South Lebanon* provides the reader with a clearer understanding of a country with an intensely complicated history. The book also includes a comprehensive

glossary of people, places and events that relate to the ongoing conflict in the region.

During her research for the book, Sultan visited with and interviewed people on both sides of the 2006 war. In one chapter, she describes a battle from two different perspectives: that of an Israeli soldier and another of a Hizbullah fighter. The battle was for control of Bint Jebail, a village in south Lebanon, where Israeli forces suffered a crushing defeat.

In another story, a Lebanese American woman recalls the horror she felt while trapped in south Lebanon with her husband and two small children. While the woman and her family escaped unscathed, the terrifying memories stayed with her long after the war ended.

While *Tragedy in South Lebanon* tends to focus more on the humanitarian aspect of the war than the politics that were involved, Sultan fully explains the political factors that contributed to the conflict, in an effort to show the reader the complexity of the situation in the region.

"Americans love human interest stories. They bring home a certain point of view that a straight news story doesn't," she stated. "A human interest story can talk politics without coming across as too political or too sensitive about an issue because the story told is one recounted by the participant or witness or victim in a tragedy such as a war."

Sultan dedicates a significant portion of her book to the media and their coverage of the 34 day conflict. She identifies the key myths that were reported by the American media, and attempts to dispel them in detail. Sultan writes that among these myths is the idea that the war began because Hizbullah captured two Israeli soldiers, and that Israel's killing of civilians was accidental.

Sultan goes on to say that while the media did report on Israel's senseless bombing of power stations and water plants, they failed to make mention of the scholarly institutions that were destroyed. She writes, "Scant attention has been paid to Israel's deliberate bombing of one of Lebanon's greatest cultural treasures—its intellectual and scholarly life."

This included the targeting of over twenty publishing houses and research institutions, as well as the archives of Al-Nahar, an Arabic daily newspaper. Sultan said that this was one of many aspects of the war that was not reported by the media, and that she felt a strong need to share the truth about this and other related topics with her readers.

"I felt that it was my duty to give readers clarification, instead of the broad brushstrokes of generalizations that were given by the mainstream media," Sultan stated.

Sultan added that she has received many positive reactions during the book's promotional tour, which included areas with low Arab populations. She said that many have a curiosity about the region, are beginning to turn away from the mainstream media and look for different sources for information.

"Overall the general public has been so positive about this book," she stated. "I think that finally, people's senses are beginning to awaken, and they are realizing that they have not been getting the right information on this subject. I am so pleased with the acceptance that this work has received."

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