

# life lines

VISUAL ARTISTS IN LEBANON SHOW THAT DESIGNERS MAY BE THE BEST FIRST RESPONDERS TO THE VOIDS LEFT BY WAR.

By Jessica Dheere

In the summer of 2006, my European vacation collided with the just-ended war between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon. I was visiting family in Cyprus when a friend who worked for the United Nations called and presented me with an irresistible opportunity: If you want to go to Beirut, she said, there's an aid boat leaving on Monday. You just need a letter of assignment as proof that you're a journalist.

I spent the next four days e-mailing editors and asking for help. Two obliged, and I started packing for the five-hour trip. On the morning of my departure, before the U.N. representative handed me my ticket, she reviewed my letters, both of which came from glossy design magazines, and asked, "Just exactly what are you going to write about?" In truth, I wasn't sure. But the idea that I didn't belong there, that design issues are irrelevant in a conflict zone, made me think about her question long after I boarded the boat.

Indeed, over the next year—Beirut is now my home—that question became not only a challenge but also a lens through which I tried to make sense of the often chaotic and cluttered visual landscape here. And even amid the proliferation of boisterous billboards and hyper-partisan rhetoric, I discovered relevant design. A sampling of small-scale projects completed in Lebanon during and since the fighting of 2006 demonstrates that graphic design in this country encompasses much more than methods of protest. These efforts suggest that Lebanese designers are determined to play a significant role in the way people here cope with conflict.



Lebanese designer Lana Daher created this logo for Khalas!, an anti-sectarian initiative.

A prime example is a series of maps generated during the war by Zeina Maasri, a design professor at the American University of Beirut. Starting on July 22 and continuing until the end of the war on August 14, Maasri issued daily PDF reports titled "Israeli Assault on Lebanon: Map of Locations Bombed." The contrast between the cool, clean look of the maps and the death and chaos they document is riveting. The small Middle Eastern nation (Lebanon is about two-thirds the size of Connecticut) is rendered in white, within a field of gray neighboring countries. Concentric red circles catalog the cumulative number and location of all strikes. Teal-blue rings indicate strikes from the previous day. A "Fact Box" in the lower right-hand corner tallies casualties and other consequences.

At first, the maps were only distributed sparsely and uploaded to the website for Samidoun, the grassroots relief collective whose volunteers collected the map's data from news updates, blogs, the U.N., and the Lebanese government. Soon, though, Maasri was flooded with requests to use the maps, and they started to gain their own

momentum. *The Economist* (without asking, reports Maasri, unperturbed) "followed the same design, almost, with minor alterations." The maps also appeared on television in the hands of the speaker of the Lebanese parliament, Nabih Berri, who used them to illustrate the scope of the bombing to the Russian minister of foreign affairs.

Maasri says the maps were a response to the incomplete media coverage of the war's first week: "It was a way to show the over-reaching scale of the bombing, that it was not a simple act of self-defense." But what made the maps so poignant was that instead of explicitly challenging the media, they let the data speak for itself.

Such a gift goes far in a society as diverse and divided as Lebanon's, where 18 religious sects vie for representation in parliament and three—Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims—have shared political power since the end of the country's 15-year civil war. It's easy to identify the partisans: They're loud, organized, and represented. But it's hard to find, much less unite, those in the gaps between party lines. These political orphans have no voice, and that's where designers are stepping in.

Since last year's split between the ruling powers and Hezbollah-led opposition coalitions, several grassroots campaigns have emerged, asking politicians to end the debilitating stalemate and urging citizens to resist devolving into another civil war. Lana Daher designed the visual identity for one of the most recent of these initiatives, Khalas! (an Arabic expression meaning, essentially, "Enough!"), which collected thousands of signatures from citizens all

