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Cartoonist's pen is window on Beirut

WAR DIARY | Blogger shares drawings and music, with 'bombs by Israeli Air Force'.

By Alwynne Gwilt

As bombs fall and thousands flee Lebanon, an illustrator is staying put and communicating his realities to the world.

"I use art to describe anything, from the most trivial to the most frightening things," says Mazen Kerbaj in a phone call from Beirut on Friday.

With thousands of hits a day, not to mention hundreds of emails, his cartoon blog ([mazenkerblog.blogspot.com](http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com)) has attracted a growing tide of world-wide visitors since he started posting last week and caught the attention of fellow bloggers.

"I think this blog thing is incredible to fight war, to make heard the voice of the people," says the 30-year-old artist and musician, who has self-published eight books and freelanced cartoons to numerous magazines.

The text-laden drawings and diary entries are full of raw emotion about his family's choices and everyday experiences in Lebanon, making for a compelling read for anyone who's felt the pull of reality television. The bombs falling around Kerbaj as he draws, you realize, is about as real as it gets.

His hardest-hitting cartoons are often the simplest. In one, he shows himself in a tiny white circle, drawing by a flickering candle, amid a blackness filled with bomb flashes and the words "We Resist."

The slogan stirred debate among site visitors, leading Kerbaj to explain he was expressing his belief in resisting aggression with the pen, or intellect, rather than the tools of war. He posted a second reply to some Israeli bloggers who voraciously defended the campaign against Hezbollah in

Lebanon. (Interestingly, many Israelis have expressed support on the site for Kerbaj's drawings.)

His site also has a six-minute music track called "Starry Night" — available for download at [muniak.com/mazenkerbaj.html](http://muniak.com/mazenkerbaj.html) — which has two credits: him on trumpet and the Israeli Air Force on bombs.

The commentary sections for the cartoons are full of supporting words.

Kerbaj seems shocked and encouraged by all the fanfare.

"It's a little bit difficult to work in these conditions because I know that every drawing I do will be published," says Kerbaj, whose cartoons are often captioned in Arabic, French and English. "Having all these people see them every day gives me a lot of hope and I would like to pursue what I am doing."

Kerbaj said on the phone that his sister and her family safely returned to their Quebec City home on Friday from their ill-timed visit to Lebanon.

He says he has trouble explaining exactly how he feels about the current hostilities.

"I feel very bad: I speak to the world about the bombs, everybody is afraid for me (while) there are real people dying on the streets and I'm safe, for now I think," he says.

Drawing "is the only way for me to keep myself sane and try to help these people. I know it's not much, but at least having a couple of thousand people seeing what I am doing — it's somehow my way of helping."

Kerbaj has lived his whole life in Beirut. He has French citizenship because his ex-wife is from France, but says he is not leaving.

"I don't accept escape when (other) people can't escape and they are being bombed," he says.

Kerbaj says he is scared what the end of the exodus of Lebanon's foreign visitors will bring.

"We can hear bombs far away but for a day and a half it's been pretty calm and we assume that's because of the foreign evacuation," he says. "It's the sort of silence that predicts something ... I hope I am wrong."

Another uncertainty is the question of what will happen to the huge influx of people — Kerbaj estimates a tenth of the population — who are flocking to Beirut from the southern territory that borders on Israel.

"They say in three weeks there will be nothing more to eat in Beirut," but Kerbaj makes no partisan arguments about the current hostilities. "I have no hatred for Israel at all, or for any other country ... going back to 1948 is totally useless," he says.

"I think nationalism and religious extremism are the two things that lead to wars," he adds.

For now, Kerbaj says he is trying to cling to his sense of humour. "I hope I can keep on being able to laugh at all the shit that is happening or else I will go crazy," he says.