

Feeling a War
By Ana Tajder

Through numbers and pictures, the media makes us believe we know what war is. But the real tragedy of war you know only when you have been in one.

So far, 680 people have been killed in the Israeli attack on Palestine, CNN tells us. This number make me angry. Not because it is high, but because it means... well, nothing.

Numbers do not describe suffering. What do you do with this information? What does 680 tell you? Does this mean the conflict is bad? Or not so bad? We are constantly bombarded with so many numbers that they already made us numb.... Tens of Millions died in WWII, 110,000 in Bosnia and Croatia; 2,974 in the World Trade Center. And now there is 680...

The numbers do not matter. We learned this lesson few weeks ago when the financial crisis taught us that numbers can be utterly detached from reality. After millions, billions and then trillions were lost and the world was still turning, the numbers proved their true nature: they are virtual, invented.

We believe that numbers are a picture of reality, but they're not. They are our attempt to rationalise reality. And in the same attempt at rationalisation, we think we know war because we know this "680" and because we take time to look at the pictures the media is feeding us.

But that is not war. The horrors of a war cannot be rationalised. You only know the reality of war when you've been in one.

I remember the moment the USA began its attack on Iraq. I was sitting on the floor of my living room, glued to my TV set, watching the black screen lightning up with green explosions. I was weeping; each of those explosions was drilling a hole in my heart. I was thinking of the Iraqi children sitting in their dark clod basements, pressed close to their parents' bodies, trembling with fear, wondering what was going on – and why.

I know how it feels. I have been there.

I was sitting in the basement of my house in Zagreb in 1991, as Yugoslav war planes flew over, passing low over our heads, threatening to kill us any second. I remember the fear chilling the blood in my veins and making my whole body shiver and my heart pump so fast I couldn't catch a breath. I remember looking at the ceiling wondering that if a bomb were to hit, which pipe would break first? Would we all die from suffocating or from drowning? Bombs exploded in the street just outside; a house **HOW NEAR?** crumbled. Would this happen to us?

Would starve to death in that basement? How would things look when we got out? I imagined our house in ruins and something horrible happening to my mother. I imagined being alone.

I was impossibly lucky. For me, those are only images – right after the strike, we were able to leave Zagreb. But it took years to get those pictures out of my head and stop jumping at any sharp noise.

War is not just about the dead. War is about the living.

This is what you cannot grasp by watching CNN. You can look at endless numbers of pictures, live reports of exploding houses, warm blood running out of massacred bodies and parents carrying dead children. You can say (and feel), "How horrible!"

But unless you have been there, you have no real understanding of what this means. The number of 680 dead is horrible. But even more horrible are the millions who survive this tragedy, living through the years haunted by the horrors they have seen.

What matters are the children who sit in a basement, hungry and scared and ill and wonder if the bomb dropped just a few meters away has just killed a best friend. What matters is not only the dead body on the street but also those who witnessed him lose his life while

struggling to hold on to theirs, people who lost a loved one, children who lost families and homes.

What matters are all those who did not die, but carry with them the fear, the hatred, the bites of aggression sunk deep under their skin. What matters is the indescribable humiliation of those who make it out of the basement and come into the ruined street, look at their destroyed house, face their dead relatives, face their ruined lives and crushed spirits and start their miserable life again from scratch.

This is the story that never appears on CNN.

Death is one thing, suffering another -- mentioned briefly, if at all, and then forgotten. Maybe it is so deep and so painful that people are not able to talk about it. After surviving a war, many lose their minds. Many kill themselves.

Through media, war becomes banal. We see it, and we think we know it. We feel involved; we think we feel compassion. We think we feel the 680.

But to us it is only a number. To those in the pictures, this war means the loss of people and a world they knew and loved, and will never know again.