**Maryam Younnes:** So my necklace is the Lebanese map that my mom came with it from Lebanon. And then the cross, you know? And actually I bought it in Ramallah. So… it's very eclectic, it's very cool. I wish this was like - you know - the Middle East that we all dream of, like you can just jump here to buy something, jump there to buy. So… Yeah, this is like my, my identities. And I think I need some Israeli representative here.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. As you know, we’re in the midst of our “Wartime Diaries” series, which is an attempt to collect slivers of life during these seemingly endless and difficult days.

Though the escalating tension on Israel’s northern border has been part of the war from the very start, our collective attention was - for months - focused on Gaza. Recently, however, that has begun to shift, and speculations about what Hezbollah is planning to do have taken center stage.

The tragic deaths of 12 kids in Majdal Shams ten days ago, followed by the retaliatory assassination of Fuad Shukr, one of Hezbollah's chief military leaders, only raised the already-high levels of anxiety and uncertainty. Does Nasrallah want an all-out war? Are we about to be bombarded by thousands of rockets raining down from Lebanon? And when will the sixty-plus-thousand evacuated residents of the north finally be able to return home?

Everyone seems to have an opinion on these matters. But with all the experts and pundits out there, the truth is that no one knows Hezbollah as well as the members of a small, and often forgotten, community living in Israel. These are the former fighters of *Tzadal*,or the SLA - the South Lebanon Army - a primarily Christian militia that for years fought alongside Israel against the PLO and Hezbollah. When Israel withdrew its forces from South Lebanon in 2000, many SLA members fled their home country - where they were largely considered to be traitors and collaborators - and relocated to Israel. While some later returned to Lebanon and others moved to third countries, roughly three to four thousand former SLA militiamen and their family members live in Israel today, and have been granted Israeli citizenship. But in the countless rounds of violence on the northern front in the last 24 years, the SLA community has found itself in an impossible position: Their adoptive country (Israel) is at war with their sworn enemy (Hezbollah), but is also - as a by-product - bombing their hometowns and villages in Southern Lebanon, where many of their friends and family members still reside.

Welcome to the Middle East. As always, it’s complicated.

Our producers Yael Ben Horin and Mitch Ginsburg spoke to Maryam Younnes, whose father was an SLA commander who moved to Israel back in May 2000. Here she is.

**Maryam Younnes:** So I'm Maryam, I'm 28 years old. I'm a student at Bar-Ilan University, and I am part of the SLA community, the Southern Lebanese Army community, here in Israel. Ahhh… in Hebrew, it's *Tzadal.* I was born in Southern Lebanon in a little Christian village called Debel. I think it's 25 minutes from the border. It's beautiful, really tiny village, green, very clean. The main occupation is tobacco growing. My uncles do all kinds of, you know, like land working. And my dad was a commander in the Southern Lebanese Army, which is the last official army, let's say, that fought Hezbollah, before Israel withdrew from Southern Lebanon in 2000, and we had to leave Lebanon because we were given two options by Hezbollah: Or to stay and be killed, pay the price as they said, or to leave Lebanon and never come back. So we left Lebanon, I was five years old. I still remember that night. My dad called my mom, and he was like, “take the girls and go to the border.” Then I don't remember really like, you know, passing from Lebanon to Israel, but I remember arriving to Israel. And I remember being in a hotel in Tiberias. And I saw the Kineret. I still remember actually, this is like the first view of Israel that I remember, as a five-years-old. And then we were in hotels, yes, and in *Kibbutzes* here in Israel as a community, obviously. We had in Shlomi, my family was in Shlomi, others in Tiberias. And we wanted to live in Christian villages, obviously, because it was just similar to our home. But they didn't accept us because we were traitors. So we were traitors because we fought against the Palestinians, the PLO, this is the narrative of Hezbollah, like “you are traitors, you fought against your country with the occupation, with the Israelis.” We want to distinguish ourselves, by the way. It totally makes sense. We are Lebanese, we speak Arabic but we're not Arabs. We were conquered by the Arabs. The Arabic was forced on us. We as Lebanese, we believe that we are Phoenicians, some believe that we are Arameans. So we were traitors. So in Israel we were forced kind of to live in, you know, Jewish Israeli towns. I grew up in Ma’alot, and I went to school there, like you know, public school. Growing up, speaking Hebrew at school and Arabic at home, celebrating Passover and Hanukkah at school and Christmas and Easter at home. And obviously bringing food and I always like to say that I taught my Israeli friends what’s Lebanese food is, and that it’s the best cuisine in the world, in my opinion. Yeah, from 2004, we are officially Israeli citizenship. So I really grew up, you know, understanding both points of view, and I always saw myself as a bridge. I'm able to catch the nuances on both sides. And it's very, you know, it just… it's a struggle to understand both points of view in both worlds. And just to see how the communication is just like, lost in translation.

**Yael Ben Horin:** So Maryam, can you tell us about yourOctober 7th?

**Maryam Younnes:** It was just… I couldn't believe what I'm seeing, just like anyone, you know? I have friends there. I have friends in the army that were you know they were called to the army. I thought that it just… what is going on? But on the other hand, I knew what to expect, in a way, because we know what this terrorists are. We know what they are doing. We knew like, like the moment they… I heard that they are inside, I knew that it's just going to be the most horrendous - you know - killing spree. This is just like what happened in Lebanon, you know, during the 60s and 70s and 80s. Like, we faced the same things. And the next day, Hezbollah started firing on Israel. So at this point, I was like, ‘oh my God, what's going on? Like, OK, this is like official war!” And it made me even angrier that a terrorist group that hijacked my country, is deciding the destiny of my people. And even the Lebanese Government, for the first time, it was very like publicly saying, “we don't want war. This is not our war.” Lebanon can't handle a war right now. Although, for me, personally, I was like, I hope that something will happen. So maybe Israel can finally take off Hezbollah. But on the other side, I say, I know that many of the Southern Lebanese people don't want war. They can't afford war.

**Yael Ben Horin:** Emm hmm.

**Maryam Younnes:** I do feel that Israelis kind of… unlike with the Palestinians, I feel like Israelis do understand that Hezbollah is an entity in Lebanon, that doesn't necessarily represent the Lebanese people. I feel that in Israel, it's kind of clear. But I think that the Israelis are very uneducated about the Arab world in general. Now that I'm grown up, and I meet a lot of people from Arab countries, I understand how even I - as a person that speaks Arabic and consume Arabic media - how much things I don't know, I'm not aware of, I'm not taught. Or if I'm taught, I'm taught totally wrong. And one of them is the fact that all Arabs hate Israel, all Arabs wanna kill the Jews, and then you go around, you meet people, you're like, ‘OK, not everyone want to do it.’ You can get to a, you know, to a common ground.

**Yael Ben Horin:** I know that since the beginning of the war, you've been creating a lot of content in Arabic in social media, explaining the situation. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

**Maryam Younnes:** Yeah, sure. So I'm still doing it. I have my TikTok, which is doing great. What I do is just I post short videos, cultural videos, religious videos about my life here as a minority, as a Christian, as Israeli, as Lebanese, you know, just showing, I think, the Arab world, how I live here, like, very authentically.

**Yael Ben Horin:** Em, what kind of reactions have you been getting?

**Maryam Younnes:** Most of my comments are super negative, obviously. Like “a traitor,” “you're not Lebanese,” “we don't claim you,” “Free Palestine,” whatever, like, you know. I knew that it's gonna be the comments. But the surprising part are the people who writes me privately saying “oh my God, I didn’t know that this is going on in Israel. My dream is to visit Jerusalem. I wish we had peace. It looks really nice in Israel. It’s similar to this place in Lebanon.” So there are a lot of comments that just surprise me over and over again, because it shows that to some people, they get the message so yes…

**Mitch Ginsburg:** I guess the war’s been more focused in the North. So maybe if you could tell us more about like, your own personal feeling about how that's been and how that's been for your family.

**Maryam Younnes:** Ummm, so yeah. I’m doing like back and forth, so I do spend the weekends up north. It’s not really easy… like we’re not evacuated but we are feeling the war very, like very on a daily basis, because we hear the missiles, we hear Israel's shooting towards Lebanon as well from Ma’alot and nearby. Ummm… it’s very hard to handle it just knowing that part of my community and also other people are going through this. And obviously I pray every night to not go through this because I don’t want to evacuate my home, I don’t want my family to evacuate, you know, I don’t want to leave my city. And we don't really know what's going to happen on the other side. So there is a constant worry about our family and about our people there, what's going to happen, how it's gonna you know… how things will turn out. It just very hard, very hard.

**Mitch Ginsburg:** Emmm.

**Maryan Younnes:** The fact that I have relatives on the other side is just, you know, it’s life. Like, I have my family there. Like this is my story, this is what I have to go through every war. I think the parents’ generation is very, you know, they… they lived in a war they grew up in a war. This is what they knew most of their lives, at least till we came to Israel and even here, we lived another wars over and over again. They… they think that obviously Hezbollah should be eliminated. But you know, they already lived through the disappointment from Israel, in a way, so they don't believe it will happen. But for us, we are full of hope. And some people also like from my generation, or younger than me, they don't care about Lebanon. Like my sister, she doesn't care about Leb… she was born here. She's super Israeli. She's like, I don't care about Lebanon, like, it's Hezbollah over there. She doesn't know anything about the complexity of Lebanon. And what does it mean to be Lebanese. So there is this as well. So you can see already like three different point of views within this tiny community here. I always try to even talk to like people in my age that already have kids, and they speak only Hebrew to their kids. I'm like, “no, why? You need to teach them Arabic as well. You need to teach them about Lebanon.” And they're like, “no, but I don't care. I live in Israel now. I'm Israeli.” “Yes but, you are also Lebanese!” You know? So I don’t know, for me it's very important for me. And I do believe that being Israeli doesn't eliminate my Lebanese identity. And being Lebanese doesn't eliminate my Israeli identities and it just normal to mix them. But I do understand that it's very conflicted to many, especially because of our story and, and our parents’ story, and what they passed on to us. So it's not easy. It's not easy.

**Yael Ben Horin:** So how do you see the future?

**Maryam Younnes:** I look at it and I'm like, ‘this is my place.’ I'm a Middle Eastern. I'm a Lebanese, I'm an Israeli. This is my place. I don't want to leave. And I don't want to leave because of radicalism. I don't want to leave because of terror. I don't want them to terrorize me. I don't want them to use this terror techniques, thinking ‘oh, they will leave no, no, no, no.’ After 7th of October, I think that I want to stay more than leave. So yeah, I'm staying here.