Our Palestine — Article — 19 August 2014

Samih al-Qasim: Poet of the Palestinian Resistance (1939–2014)



Samih al-Qasim (1939–2014) was one of the foremost contemporary Palestinian and Arab poets, his name tied to the poetry of revolution and resistance from inside the lands occupied in 1948. Born in Zarqa to a family from al-Rameh in the Galilee, he refused the military conscription Israel imposed on the Druze community and was repeatedly jailed and placed under house arrest. He published more than 60 books, Marcel Khalife sang his “Upright I Walk,” and he died in Safad on 19 August 2014. [1] [2] [3]

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Who was Samih al-Qasim?

Samih al-Qasim was a Palestinian poet whose work dealt with the struggle and suffering of the Palestinians; by thirty he had published six collections that won wide fame across the Arab world [1] [3]. He was called the “poet of the Palestinian resistance,” “poet of Arabism,” “knight of poets,” the “Mutanabbi of Palestine” and the “historian poet” [1].

Samih al-Qasim at a glance

Item	Details
Name	Samih Muhammad al-Qasim [1]
Born	11 May 1939, Zarqa, Jordan [1] [2]
Origin	Al-Rameh, Upper Galilee, Palestine [1] [3]

Item	Details
Education	Latin Sisters school in al-Rameh, then Terra Santa in Nazareth; philosophy and political economy in Moscow [1]
Titles	Poet of the Palestinian resistance, poet of Arabism, knight of poets, the Mutanabbi of Palestine, the historian poet [1]
Works	More than 60 books (some sources say about 70) of poetry, prose, drama and translation [2] [1] [4]
Died	19 August 2014, Safad hospital, after a battle with liver cancer [1] [4]
Buried	Al-Rameh, 21 August 2014 [2] [1]

Timeline

Year	Event
1939	Born in Zarqa on 11 May [1]
1941	The family returns to al-Rameh [1]
1948	The Nakba; the occupation reaches al-Rameh before he turns nine [1]
1957	Finishes secondary school [1]
1958	Founds the “Free Druze Youth” against conscription and is arrested; publishes his first collection, *Processions of the Sun* [1]
1966	Editor-in-chief of *Hadha al-Alam* [1] [3]
5 June 1967	Seized from the offices of *al-Ittihad* and jailed in Damoun prison [1]
1973	Founds Arabesque publications in Haifa [3] [5]
Late 1980s	Leaves the Communist Party to devote himself to journalism and literature [1]
2011	Publishes his memoir *It’s Only an Ashtray* [1]
2014	Dies on 19 August; buried in al-Rameh on 21 August [1] [2]

Birth and childhood: “They tried to silence me”

Samih al-Qasim was born on 11 May 1939 in Zarqa, Jordan, to a Palestinian Druze family from al-Rameh in the Upper Galilee, which returned there in 1941 [1]. His father, Muhammad al-Qasim, was an officer in the Transjordan Frontier Force, and his mother, Hana Fayyad, came from a family active in culture and national work; he had four brothers and two sisters [1].

It is told that as a small child he was on a train with his family returning to Palestine at the height of the Second World War when he began to cry; the terrified passengers, fearing German planes would find them, threatened to kill him and silence him for ever [5]. When he was later told the story, he said: “Fine – they have tried to silence me since childhood. I’ll show them” [5].

The Nakba and school

Samih al-Qasim went to primary school at the Latin Sisters school in al-Rameh (1945–1953), then to Terra Santa preparatory school in Nazareth (1953–1955), finishing secondary school in 1957 [1]. In 1948 the Israeli occupation reached al-Rameh before he turned nine; among the experiences that marked him most were the Israeli military governor’s visit to his school and the pupils being forced to sing songs in Hebrew [1].

He later studied philosophy and political economy in Moscow [1]. He worked as a teacher in schools in the Galilee and Carmel until the Israeli education minister dismissed him for his political and literary activity [1].

Refusing conscription, and prison

Samih al-Qasim refused the compulsory military service Israel imposed on the Druze community, and in 1958 founded the “Free Druze Youth” movement against conscription, for which he was arrested [1] [2]. The same year he was barred from a poetry festival in Kafr Yasif [1].

On 5 June 1967, the day the war began, he was seized from the offices of the newspaper *al-Ittihad* and jailed in Damoun prison on Mount Carmel [1]. He was imprisoned more than once, placed under house arrest, dismissed from his work several times for his poetry and politics, and faced more than one death threat [3] [2].

Journalism and cultural work

Samih al-Qasim joined the Communist Party and sat on its Central Committee, leaving in the late 1980s to devote himself to journalism and literature [1] [3]. He helped edit *al-Ghad* and *al-Ittihad*, became editor-in-chief of *Hadha al-Alam* in 1966, then literary editor at *al-Ittihad* and editor-in-chief of the magazine *al-Jadid* for about ten years [3] [1]. He founded the newspaper *Kull al-Arab* in Nazareth and was its honorary editor-in-chief, and co-edited the cultural quarterly *Ida'at* [1] [3].

He founded Arabesque publications in Haifa in 1973, later ran the Popular Arts Foundation in Haifa, and headed the Arab Writers' Union and the General Union of Palestinian Arab Writers from their founding [3] [5]. He was also a co-founder of the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality [1].

His poetry and works

Samih al-Qasim published his first collection, *Processions of the Sun*, in 1958 at nineteen, and six collections before he turned thirty [1]. He published more than 60 books of poetry, short stories, drama, essays and translation, collected in seven volumes [2] [3], while other sources count more than 70 books including criticism and autobiography [1] [4]. Among them is his memoir *It's Only an Ashtray* (2011) [1].

He began with classical metred verse, then developed long epic poems he called *sarbiyyat*, drawing on scripture, myth and history and using repetition and intertextuality [1]. Many of his poems were translated into English, French, Turkish, Russian, German, Italian and other languages [1] [3].

His poems in song

Among his best-known poems is “Upright I Walk” (*Muntasib al-Qama Amshi*), set to music and sung by the Lebanese artist Marcel Khalife, which became a resistance anthem with its image of the Palestinian walking head held high, an olive branch in one hand and his coffin on his shoulder [1] [3]. Also well known is a poem he wrote during the First Intifada and recorded in his own voice, defying the occupation’s soldiers and tanks and declaring that the Palestinian people – children, elders and mothers – will not surrender [1].

His death: Safad, 19 August 2014

After some three years battling liver cancer, Samih al-Qasim died on the evening of Tuesday 19 August 2014 at Safad hospital, aged 75 [1] [4] [3]. Shortly before his death his readers shared a text he wrote about death, saying he did not love death but did not fear it [4].

On 21 August 2014 thousands followed his coffin in al-Rameh raising Palestinian flags, having come from Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Naqab and Arab towns inside the Green Line; Druze and Christian clergy and political figures took part, and al-Rameh’s local council declared a full day of mourning [2] [1]. He was buried on a hill in al-Rameh on the slopes of Mount Jarmaq [2] [1]. At the wake a recording of his own voice thanked the mourners [2].

Legacy and awards

Samih al-Qasim received many awards, including Spain’s “Laurel of Poetry,” two French prizes for his translated selections, Egypt’s Naguib Mahfouz Prize, Kuwait’s Babtain Prize for poetry, the Jerusalem Medal from President Yasser Arafat twice, and the Palestine Prize for Poetry [1].

His poetry remains testimony that the Palestinians who stayed on their land in 1948 never gave up their identity, despite military rule, attempts at Israelisation and forced conscription. The child the train passengers tried to silence became a

voice no one could silence.

Video

Frequently asked questions about Samih al-Qasim

Who was Samih al-Qasim?

A Palestinian poet from al-Rameh in the Galilee, one of the foremost poets of the Palestinian resistance, called the “Mutanabbi of Palestine.”

Where was Samih al-Qasim born?

In Zarqa, Jordan, on 11 May 1939, to a family from al-Rameh.

Why was Samih al-Qasim imprisoned?

For refusing the compulsory conscription imposed on the Druze and for his poetry and politics; he was jailed repeatedly and placed under house arrest.

What are Samih al-Qasim’s best-known poems?

“Upright I Walk,” sung by Marcel Khalife, and his First Intifada poem recorded in his own voice.

How many books did Samih al-Qasim publish?

More than 60, and some sources say about 70, of poetry, prose, drama and translation.

When did Samih al-Qasim die?

On 19 August 2014 at Safad hospital, after a battle with liver cancer.

Where is Samih al-Qasim buried?

In his hometown of al-Rameh in the Upper Galilee.

Sources and references

Arabic-language sources are listed with translated titles.

1. “Samih al-Qasim: The Historian Poet and the ‘Mutanabbi’ of Palestine,” Al Jazeera Encyclopedia, 20 September 2025.
2. “Palestinian Poet Samih al-Qasim Laid to Rest,” Al Jazeera Net, 21 August 2014.
3. Ali Saada, “Samih al-Qasim: The ‘Upright One’ Has Gone,” Arabi21.
4. “Samih al-Qasim: The Upright One Departs,” Noon Post, 20 August 2014.
5. Aed Omeira, “Samih al-Qasim: Preserving a People’s Memory in a Poem,” Noon Post, 9 April 2024.