Literature of the 1982 Siege of Beirut: Words behind the Barricades

The 1982 siege of Beirut was not a battle of arms alone. In the besieged city remained Palestinian, Lebanese and Arab poets, writers and journalists who refused to leave when leaving was still possible; they put out a daily newspaper under bombardment and wrote poems and diaries, so that their words became part of the steadfastness and, after the departure, a written memory set against forgetting. [1][2]

From the newspaper al-Ma’raka, published daily throughout the siege, to Mahmoud Darwish’s Memory for Forgetfulness and In Praise of the High Shadow, the diaries of Mu’in Bseiso, Amjad Nasser and Fawwaz Traboulsi, and the memoirs of the doctor Fayez Rashid, this article surveys the most notable writing produced in and about the siege. This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 siege of Beirut. [2][3][4]

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Key works of the siege

Work	Author	Form
al-Ma’raka	Mu’in Bseiso and Palestinian and Arab writers	Daily newspaper published throughout the siege
Letter to an Israeli Soldier	Mahmoud Darwish and Mu’in Bseiso	Joint poem written during the siege
In Praise of the High Shadow	Mahmoud Darwish	Long poem (1983)
Memory for Forgetfulness	Mahmoud Darwish	Prose work on a single day in August 1982
88 Days behind the Barricades of Beirut	Mu’in Bseiso	Diaries and articles (Dar al-Farabi, 1985)
Beirut, Small as the Palm of a Hand	Amjad Nasser	Diaries of the siege
On a Hope with No Cure	Fawwaz Traboulsi	Diaries of the siege (Riad El-Rayyes, 2007)
The Wounds Bear Witness	Fayez Rashid	A doctor’s memoirs of the siege (2015)
The Ship of Exile	Jocelyne Saab	Documentary film (1982)

Sources: [2][5][4][6][7][8][9][10]

al-Ma’raka: a newspaper under bombardment

When the invasion began, the Palestinian poet Mu’in Bseiso was at a conference in Tashkent. He left at once, returned to Beirut by breaking through the siege, and helped found the newspaper al-Ma’raka (“The Battle”), which came out every day of the 88-day siege and which he edited together with a number of Palestinian and Arab writers. [2][5]

In al-Ma’raka Bseiso published his articles and diaries, later collected in 88 Days behind the Barricades of Beirut, published by Dar al-Farabi in 1985. The writer Maan al-Bayari finds that the book’s texts, for all their heat and mobilising fervour,

keep their value as a record of the battle of Beirut, and dwells on Bseiso's phrase "Arab Zionism" for those who failed to stand by the city. The book includes an open letter to Yasser Arafat and records the stance of the Arab, regional and international powers that stood by and watched. [5][1][2]

"Letter to an Israeli Soldier"

During the siege Mahmoud Darwish and Mu'in Bseiso wrote a joint poem, "Letter to an Israeli Soldier," which Arafat called "the poem of the Joint Forces," after the Palestinian–Lebanese Joint Forces defending the city. [1][2]

Darwish later recalled that Bseiso refused to believe the occupation army could ever enter Beirut, that he "belied reality" so that the poem would stay right, and that this poetic stance aimed to keep up the fighters' morale. On the twelfth day of the fighting Darwish wrote another of the poems of the siege. [1][2]

Mahmoud Darwish: from the barricade to memory

Mahmoud Darwish stayed in Beirut throughout the siege and later wrote two works about it that became landmarks of Palestinian literature. The first, In Praise of the High Shadow (1983), is a long poem written after the invasion of Beirut, with many sections and voices moving between dialogue and address. It opens with something like the classical lament over ruins, summoning Beirut as a memory of love and pain. The poem ties what happened in Beirut to a long history of crimes, invoking Hiroshima, Sabra and Shatila, Deir Yassin and Kafr Qasim, the killer one though the places differ, and it reproaches an Arab reality that left the city alone and mourns the fragmentation of the Arab lands. [4]

The second, Memory for Forgetfulness, is a prose work built around a single long day of August 1982 in besieged Beirut, through which Darwish distils a wider history, mixing narrative with poetry, stories and news documentation, personal memories interwoven with the events of the war. Coffee is a central motif: the

writer contemplates its ritual and its aroma under bombardment and the memories it calls up. [6][3]

In Memory for Forgetfulness Darwish takes up most of the questions raised during the siege, including the idea of departure itself, retreating from it and returning to it, at a time when Philip Habib's negotiations had advanced and the leadership was keeping the idea quiet to protect the fighters' morale. The text insists on Palestinian collective memory against attempts to distort and falsify history, refuses forgetting, and dwells on the human side of the Palestinian under siege, love included. [3]

Diaries of the siege

The Jordanian poet Amjad Nasser took into the shelters the poetry of Darwish, Cavafy, Rilke, Unsi al-Hajj and Nazim Hikmet, and kept a diary of the siege in his book Beirut, Small as the Palm of a Hand. He describes the invasion as a miniature end of the world, the bombardment as aimed at annihilation and submission, and the siege as collective punishment; he draws the long life in the shelters, the closing of the crossings between the city's halves, and Sharon sitting behind the Lebanese president's desk at Baabda. Yasser Arafat wrote the book's preface, expressing his sorrow at leaving Beirut; the poet Ghassan Zaqtan wrote an introduction titled "Simpler than Heroism"; and the novelist Rashad Abu Shawar wrote the back-cover text. [7]

Diaries and testimonies of the siege were also written by Rashad Abu Shawar, Bilal al-Hassan and Fawwaz Traboulsi, who collected his diaries in On a Hope with No Cure: Diaries of the 1982 Siege of Beirut. The Palestinian doctor Fayez Rashid, who worked at Gaza Hospital and at the Haik Zian school turned into a field hospital, recorded the testimonies of his wounded, children, women, elderly people and fighters, in The Wounds Bear Witness: Memoirs of a Doctor under Siege. [1][8][9]

Years later the commander Moein al-Taher told the story of the Student Battalion and the battle of Beaufort Castle in Interview with Moein al-Taher, with the novelist Elias Khoury and the journalist Michel Nofal. [11]

The image and the camera

The testimony of the siege was not confined to words. The Lebanese filmmaker Jocelyne Saab was the only journalist allowed aboard the Atlantis, which carried Arafat out of Beirut, with a camera, and she made her film The Ship of Exile (1982), while the Lebanese photographer Fouad Elkoury took rare pictures of Arafat on board. [10][12]

In Ansar detention camp, where thousands of prisoners were held after the invasion, the prisoners made art out of earth, soap and limestone; the prisoner-artist Hussein Qassir painted pictures inspired by the Compound 20 massacre and the tunnel escape, and Naji al-Ali drew a prisoner behind the wire reassuring his family. [13]

Why the literature of the siege endures

The writers of besieged Beirut wrote at a moment when the city stood alone against the region’s most powerful army while the Arab world looked on, so that what they wrote became a document of the crime and of the steadfastness alike. Maan al-Bayari finds that some of what Bseiso wrote about the Arab reality of the time still applies today, while Khalid al-Maamari reads In Praise of the High Shadow in the light of what is happening in Gaza: the deed does not change though the years and places do. [1][4]

Mu’in Bseiso died in London on 23 January 1984, less than two years after the siege, and was buried in Cairo after the occupation refused to let his body into Palestine. [2]

Timeline

Date	Event
June 1982	Mu’in Bseiso breaks through the siege back to Beirut; al-Ma’raka founded [2]

Date	Event
Summer 1982	Darwish and Bseiso’s “Letter to an Israeli Soldier” [1]
August 1982	The day around which Memory for Forgetfulness is built [3]
30 August 1982	Jocelyne Saab films The Ship of Exile aboard the Atlantis [10]
1983	Mahmoud Darwish writes In Praise of the High Shadow [4]
23 January 1984	Mu’in Bseiso dies in London [2]
1985	88 Days behind the Barricades of Beirut published [5]
2007	Fawwaz Traboulsi’s diaries On a Hope with No Cure published [8]
2015	Fayez Rashid’s The Wounds Bear Witness and Interview with Moein al-Taher published [9]

Frequently asked questions about the literature of the 1982 siege of Beirut

What was al-Ma’raka?

A daily newspaper published in Beirut throughout the 88 days of the siege, co-founded by Mu’in Bseiso and edited with Palestinian and Arab writers. [2][5]

What did Mahmoud Darwish write about the siege of Beirut?

The poem In Praise of the High Shadow (1983), the prose work Memory for Forgetfulness about a single day of August 1982, and “Letter to an Israeli Soldier” with Mu’in Bseiso. [4][3][1]

What is Mu’in Bseiso’s book on the siege?

88 Days behind the Barricades of Beirut, collecting his articles and diaries from al-Ma’raka, published by Dar al-Farabi in 1985. [5][1]

Who wrote diaries of the siege?

Among them Mu’in Bseiso, Amjad Nasser, Fawwaz Traboulsi, Rashad Abu Shawar and Bilal al-Hassan, and the doctor Fayez Rashid. [1][7][8][9]

Was the siege documented on film?

Yes: among others Jocelyne Saab’s The Ship of Exile (1982) and Fouad Elkoury’s photographs aboard the Atlantis. [10][12]

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