

[www.nowlebanon.com](http://www.nowlebanon.com)

## Talking To: Youssef Bazzi



Youssef Bazzi

Youssef Bazzi, a Lebanese journalist and poet, grew up the son of an SSNP fighter who himself took up arms during the civil war. Disgruntled with the dishonest and violent culture of militancy, he turned to poetry and literature to heal. His book *Yasser Arafat Looked at me and Smiled*, which was released in English and Arabic in 2007 and translated into French this year, is a testimony and a call against war. He has four poetry collections, and has been awarded the Youssef al-Khal Poetry Prize. Bazzi, who today writes for *al-Mustaqbal* daily, sat down with NOW Lebanon's Hanin Ghaddar to discuss his past experiences with politics and war, including being kicked out of West Beirut by opposition fighters in May, and his present career as an intellectual and writer.

**NOW Lebanon:** *How old were you when you started as a fighter?*

**Youssef Bazzi:** I started carrying a weapon when I was 14. It was the summer of 1981. Before that, I was practically raised by the [Syrian Socialist National] party because my father was a martyr, and I was one of the "children of the martyrs." The party was the substitute father, and thus I was the son of this environment, so naturally I turned from a cub, as they say, to a fighter. I devoted all my time to my work as a fighter from that time until the end of 1986.

**NOW:** *So about five years?*

**Bazzi:** Yes. Those five years saw pretty much the worst kinds of war, from street wars to the Israeli invasion, the *intifada* of February 6, the battle of '83 in the Mountain, the battles in Tripoli, then the wars between all the sects and the wars between Arafat and Syria and the intelligence agencies, and all the wars that took place under one roof. [With] the moral collapse of the war and the political degradation, especially after 1984, it started to seem to me that

the ideologies were sullied and had fallen from their idealistic nature to become simply a form of controlling the streets, distribution of powers and killing of brothers. It was a game of blood that had reached its peak, and all meanings were sacrificed.

**NOW: *Were you fully aware of what you were doing? Did you understand the politics?***

**Bazzi:** It's part of the nature of adolescence, I think that politics was one of the ambitions of young men cut off from the world that didn't agree with slogans like "change the world," or expressions like, "the new person," or "the final victory." For us, politics was sort of a religious conversion, not necessarily celestial, but we can describe it as a religious system related to arriving at salvation, salvation of spirit and the world in one blow. In front of this faith, life, our lives, were very cheap, or even valueless, compared with what we called "the issue." We didn't understand, or I personally didn't understand, the meaning of politics until it was too late, not until I saw the ideologies that resembled religions were thrown to the wind. After that, I embarked on a journey of discovery. I learned the meaning of coexistence, how to achieve it, how to spread advantage and personal freedom to the benefit of the world, reconciliation, the meaning of citizenship, of identity, of a personal and communal goal, and especially an appreciation for life and its value, and looking also into this idea of seeking happiness, called value and rights for all people.

**NOW: *What are the images from the war that have affected you the most?***

**Bazzi:** The image that affected me the most is a scene of my friend walking a few steps before me. In the blink of an eye a rocket exploded on the balcony and the balcony fell directly on him. The second scene I saw when I was in the northern Metn area, and I saw a mule split in two by a rocket, and I felt like it was a typical victim because it really had nothing to do with it. The worst thing I passed was when I fell into an ambush in the battle of Tripoli. [Two] men, no more than a meter-and-a-half away, lying against a wall, and they were killed with one barrage of bullets. It was an ugly scene.

**NOW: *What did the May events tell you?***

**Bazzi:** Since the events of May 7, I have correctly surmised that the Lebanese war from 75-90 was carried out by just 10% of the Lebanese people, and 90% were the "silent majority." In my view, there is nothing called "the silent majority" in Lebanon after March 14, 2005. The majority is not silent anymore. The greatness of the Independence Intifada was the fact that the majority took politics into their own hands, took expression into their own hands, and exercised its power as a non-silent majority. From a cultural perspective, May 7 was the inclination of that 10% to control. Their biggest motivation is nostalgia for the militia power they enjoyed. Their policies turn back the past, to the time of the Kalashnikov and RPG, in order to eliminate the majority or make it silent once again. I think that they succeeded in staging a military coup, in terrorizing the majority, which, although no longer silent, now stutters. The face-off now pushes the majority to speak out in order to prevail over fear. The parties behind the May 7 events essentially exercised their sovereignty through fear, exactly as a repressive regime does to its people.

**NOW: *But the weapons are still there on the streets of Beirut...***

**Bazzi:** Weapons are still as of two days ago in the streets. I walked through Hamra and Ras Beirut, and I saw the Nazi gangs with the telephone network, and weapons hidden behind columns, and pistols at their sides. Some of them appeared to me intoxicated with their power over the darkness, and that revived duty. I realized exactly the kind of agenda March 8 [is offering] in place of the agenda of the state. I discovered the meaning of the "defense strategy" and the Hezbollah state.

In their opinion, the felonies being perpetrated are not crimes. Their upbringings make them look at civil laws as an obstacle to the implementation of their goals. They see the idea of a state as a Western phenomenon designed to serve its own interests. They see the democratic system as an opportunity to trick the people. They despise the structural fragility of the democratic system. They see democracy as an opportunity that they should abuse and then eliminate. If they consider their blood cheap, then they certainly consider the blood and property of others cheap as well.

The events of May 7 sent a clear message that political terrorism, carrying weapons, open assassination, and that violence against civilians are not crimes. This message makes distance between the ambitions of March 14 and its supporters farther than we imagined. The March 14 allies lose if they face a militia with another militia, and lose if

they stay like this; peaceful in the face of terrorism and arms.

**NOW: So what should they do? What are the choices?**

**Bazzi:** This problem is made trickier by the creation of this evasive term, "reconciliation." This is the highest level of truce, but still so much less than a consensus. If this reconciliation did not say so far that we must remove arms from politics, then it is an exchange between the strong and the weak. It is the most March 14 can do in order to preserve the coming elections and to try and lessen the influence of these arms on the elections. I think it is a gamble between one side, whose cards are showing, and the other, who hides all his cards with his pistol at his side.

**NOW: What about March 8, why are they interested in reconciliation?**

**Bazzi:** March 14 created a recourse called "public opinion." The problem is that the other side isn't bound by the decisions of public opinion. March 8's interest in these reconciliations is to buy time in order to know the regional inclinations and their merit. No more, no less.

**NOW: In your opinion, what are the similarities and the differences between 1975 and 2008?**

**Bazzi:** In 1975, the political disagreements became a military struggle with the entry of Palestinian weapons into the internal equation, destabilizing the Lebanese model. In 2008, Iranian-Syrian arms came into the country, and into the internal political equation, dragging the country into a military conflict. Another similarity is that in 1975, there was an indirect appeal to the regional military powers, Israel and Syria, and between 2006 and 2008, there was also an indirect appeal to the Israeli and Syrian armies. The difference is that in 1975, there was one community that was pushing the rhetoric of the idea of Lebanese identity, while in 2008, because of previous wars, this idea crossed confessional lines, and was not tied to one sect. This is an essential difference that the "Lebanese-ness" was not translated into a sectarian language and now includes all sects.

The other difference is that in 1975, there was a revolutionary enthusiasm for the idea of armed struggle, and this enthusiasm was accompanied by a culture that celebrated arms, while in 2008, arms became in the public view - a public that was no longer silent - synonymous with the decline and death of politics. According to this distinct meaning, in 1975 there was plenty of moral justification from most people for the war, while in 2008 no one who carries arms can find moral justification for their actions. They are too weak to ask forgiveness and too weak to hide their distress, so we see them create a narrative that they were victims of an attack or dilemma, or that they were confronting an American-Mossad plan in Beirut, for example... This is when the slogan of May 7 became "arms to defend arms" and nothing else. The Resistance became just a resistance, not liberation; it is end unto itself and not a means. The Resistance has become a kind of eternal life. In other words, arms became the religion of the fighters.

**NOW: What about on the personal level, how did May 7 affect you?**

**Bazzi:** March 7 took on a personal dimension. My office at the *Mustaqbal* newspaper was burned, and with it my personal archives, the material remains of my memory. The battle between the fighters and the civilian population took place right under my balcony where my wife and son spent a night of terror, bullets and bombs, alone without me. May 7 brought the war to my son, who was born in a time of peace expecting to live a life different than the one I lived. During the events of May, the militia intelligence came to my house looking for me three times. I was forced into hiding, waiting, which reminded me of the Israeli occupation when I had the same experience... I was wanted by Israel agents at that time. May 7, and in a criminal way, if I can say that, forced me to flee after 18 years of civil peace to be on the run again - I, who lived through years of war. The militias, in order to achieve their political goals, made me a fugitive to the East of Beirut this time. I think the militias' worst crime was making the Lebanese potential refugees, always ready to flee.

I think there is a minority in the intellectual society that was hypocritical by taking a neutral role while providing justifications for what happened. Their criticism was folded into understanding. This is, in my view, inexcusable.

**NOW: How did you move from fighting to writing poetry?**

**Bazzi:** It was my good luck that during my life in the militia I decided for reasons that are still unclear to me today to

stay in school. I was fond of books, ideas, philosophy and literature. At the same time I was fond of the art of cinema and I realized that what I had experienced was not something to throw away and forget because it deserved to be written. I was inspired by the American movies that depicted the Vietnam War, for example. This is what pushed me to write, and because I come from an Arab culture, I assumed that poetry was the highest form of writing. This is how I got mixed up with poetry.

Then at another point I was awakened to the curative role of literature and its ability to restore and keep internal balance. This is what made my poems an attempt to narrate the diaries of the war. I also became more aware of other poetic experiences and history, and I was awakened to the fact that what I was doing mirrored the experiences of other young men from my generation who also took the same road. Then the intellectual, literary society met those experiences with open arms and was awakened to the fact that those youths penned what is called "war literature." After four collections of poetry, I felt that the conditions of a poem and its technique don't allow me to be loose or free in the narration, and I wanted to rid myself of this chest, this stone, of memory, so I threw it on the pages without any poetic or literary conditions, hoping to rid myself of it.