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To cite this article: Moussaoui, F. (2022). The city that fled from its inhabitants. *Al-Raida*, 46(2), 51–54. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2522

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2522>

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Article type: Article

Published online: 4th August 2022

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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The City that Fled From its Inhabitants¹

Fatima Moussaoui

The city today is no longer the same as it was a year ago, nor it is the same as what it was on August 3, 2020. To be specific, the city is not the same as it was before 6 p.m. on August 4, 2020. For those trying to understand how and why this happened, time—its details and its secrets—is always on our minds. We know that time can change in an instance, despite the certainty that this disrupted moment is merely the hidden compilation of the moments and years following the end of the civil war.

The daily passage of time by which we used to measure our ages has changed, perhaps forever. Time in this city, Beirut, has stopped at 6:07 p.m. on the evening of the day where everything exploded. The city's landmarks as well as the faces of its inhabitants have changed forever. Whoever lives in this city, Beirut, knows exactly what it means to “really” age in a matter of days, as though these wizened features were simply following the natural progression of time over the years.

In this city and in this country in general, you gradually begin to identify with women victims of acid attacks in India and Afghanistan: People who were subjected to such a barbaric violence. This act is done to punish them for the power they possess, the choices they have made during their life, and sometimes their mere existence. This act is done to visibly, and violently, mark the face of an unsuspecting woman, to ensure that everyone who now lays eyes on this woman will know that she suffered from such a heinous attack. This is what happened to us on the fourth of August. Someone threw acid on our faces, leaving a deep scar that is difficult to erase and to surmount. Many acid attack survivors recount that they experience emotional and physical trauma after experiencing such a horrendous crime. Many others resort to complete isolation due to the disfigurement and difference in their appearances. This sounds all too familiar in Beirut.

It was recounted to us through childhood tales and our grandmothers' stories that Beirut survived seven earthquakes, each one having completely destroyed it. This means that the city had already exhausted its seven lives and is now relying on mere luck to survive. But this city's luck is plagued with hurdles. The city is hostage to a gang that has clamped down on everything and taken its inhabitants as hostages, rendering them mere statistics: Each person just another person, all with similar stories and awaiting similar fates.

When I visited Hiroshima four years ago, I was engulfed by feelings of strangeness and pain that are unforgettable. When I talk about Hiroshima, I do not mean to compare the two crimes, the Beirut Blast and the atomic bomb, to each other. Rather, I mention them together because there is a significant amount of anger that seeps into you while describing what happened to the two cities. Anger that seeps into speech, feelings, the ability to build memory and even the ability to forget. Seventy-five years have passed since Hiroshima was bombed; the hands of the clocks in the city, however, remain locked on the moment their world changed forever. Clocks in Beirut have also stopped, and in doing so they are telling us something.

The destruction in Hiroshima resists healing, despite the passage of time, because it has been entrusted with the memory of death. Besides, the effect of black rain on the walls was carefully preserved in a museum, urging one, despite the constant calls for peace, to be enraged, to be in a lot of rage. Simply put, you become unwilling to accept that forgiveness is used to cover permanent scars. This is the same anger that consumes me today, and that may devour me and devour us eternally. In Hiroshima, there were American tourists whose faces registered guilt, and those who felt shame. They were saying as they were leaving and that they were not the ones who did it and that they would not have accepted to drop the bomb. And then they looked away, apologetic even though they were not even alive when Hiroshima was bombed. As for Beirut, none of the politicians in power felt ashamed or felt morally responsible or guilty. We saw them throwing accusations at each other on TV stations and utilizing their trademark skills: Exploiting death, destruction, and pain to their advantage and using it to settle political scores shamelessly. We saw them sharing and benefitting from aid rations. We saw them lining up submissively in front of a new "high commissioner" who ordered them to attend, and they

obediently complied. Here, you fail to ask yourself about the solution, you ask instead about insolence.

The other recurring question that has been gnawing at all of us since that day is: What should we do the next time we see smoke? Do we run? Whom do we contact? Should we hide our faces or bodies, and with what? Will it be ammonium nitrate or other material that isn't disclosed? Bombs? Mines? Are we going to lose dear ones? Will dear ones mourn us? Part of the answer came to us on September 10, when a fire broke out at the crime scene itself. People moved away from the windows, rushed from the vicinity of the fire in any direction, fleeing from anything, fleeing from an evident fate. They called each other immediately to reassure, to warn, to cry, swear, and curse. I am not talking here about the terror that accompanies our nightmares. Rather, I am talking about the current pattern in which we address ourselves and the way our reactions speak to us, we the ones that "survived" the Beirut Port explosion.

I do not know whether it is ethical to romanticize the traumas and tragedies that befall human beings by praising their resilience and survival mechanisms after everything that ensued. The question today is how do we go through life when the everyday is a real and arduous act of resistance? How do we acquire the ability to live after the pieces and rhythms of normality are gone and replaced by a terrible amount of debris? I have repeatedly asked myself, since the country began its gradual economic downturn at the beginning of 2019 and then with the rapid fall associated with the epidemic, are we nearing a new end? How can anyone foresee the country's future, if there is one? When does it start or end? Will countries and cities actually end, or do they stay and we leave? Cities and capitals in particular are our political, social, and economic frameworks. They are the permanence of the struggle between construction and demolition, progress and recession, victory and retreat. They are the final stage of human civilization and the depth of citizenship, humanity, and being. If humanity loses its strength, will they end? Do they end?

On the fourth of August, the questions I was posing changed. The city is not annihilated. The moment the explosion occurred, the ring of pink smoke carried the city and left. Contrary to what might be expected, we did not leave; the city departed that day, and all that is left

remained. Bare, without columns, with only the border or frame. And we remain, like this, without features.

Notes

¹ This article was originally published online by *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter 2019) as part of the collaboration between *Kohl* and *Al-Raida* entitled "Writing Beirut." The original article can be found here: <https://kohljournal.press/issue-5-3>.