

## War trauma and self-help

Przemysław Piotrowski, Stefan Florek, Bożena Gulla

### Summary

This study is an attempt to analyze the frontline soldier Farouk's drawings, inscriptions that accompany them and his text entitled "In the time of war", as a form of self-help. The material analyzed includes a series of seven drawings and comments. In the analysis we combine two psychological approaches: the psychodynamic and the cognitive-evolutionary one.

Farouk's sketches have a surreal and/or more or less abstract character. They are a clear reflection of the situation in which the author feels caught or even trapped. Farouk's drawings can be treated both as a response to the extreme situation and as a specific attempt to deal with trauma of war.

We suggest that the level of abstraction of his drawings indicates the depth of trauma and decreases with the return to mental health and ability to verbalize experiences. We think that enhancing patients to express their traumatic experiences in the form of drawings with comments can be a useful tool of diagnosis and therapy. It can be also a helpful way of autotherapy when the possibility of professionals' assistance is limited.

**trauma, war, coping, psychology, drawings**

### INTRODUCTION

There are many examples of the expression of wartime experiences through art by people who have an art education and fought on the fronts of various wars, but aren't outstanding artists [1-3]. However, artistic statements of soldiers who, without any previous art experience, created works only for themselves seem to be quite unique. Such unique character have creations by Iraqi soldier Farouk.

It is difficult to assess how often soldiers engage in this type of activity, but probably the case of Farouk is not the completely isolated one. Taking into account the fact that Farouk man-

aged to return to a normal life, one can hope that idiographic study of his drawings and poem will allow to gain insight into the process of self-coping with trauma and to draw conclusions of a practical nature. Farouk's drawings have already been interpreted in psychodynamic terms [4]. In this paper we try to point out, from a broader cognitive perspective, certain phenomena associated with them, which can be important for the diagnosis and psychotherapy of soldiers suffering from PTSD.

The material analyzed includes a series of seven drawings with inscriptions and poem "In the time of war" by an Iraqi named Farouk. Six of these drawings were created by Farouk in 1982, when he took part in the Iran-Iraq war as a soldier. The seventh drawing is dated to March 1999, so it was made 17 years after "war" drawings. The text "In the time of war" was created on September 13, 2017.

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**Przemysław Piotrowski, Stefan Florek, Bożena Gulla:** Department of Forensic Psychology and Criminology, Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland

**Correspondence address:** p.piotrowski@uj.edu.pl

Farouk at the beginning of the 1980s studied in Poland, where he met a Polish woman named Halina. Their relationship, however, did not last long. In 1982 martial law continued in Poland, which was associated with a significant deterioration of the living standard. Farouk decided to go to Iraq for money, and then he wanted to come back to Poland. It turned out, however, that in Iraq he was drafted into the army and never returned to Poland. Because Farouk's son married a Pole, when Farouk, currently a teacher, found his war drawings, he sent them, along with the poem entitled "In the time of war", to his daughter-in-law.

An analysis of Farouk's drawings requires consideration of certain facts concerning the Iraqi-Iran war. The war lasted eight years from September 1980 to August 1988 [5]. What is particularly important in the context of analyzing Farouk's drawings is that chemical weapons were used and Iranians attacked using, among others, the so called human waves, which led to huge losses on their side [6]. During the so-called Operation Ramadan al-Mubarak (which lasted until August 3, 1982) Iran used human waves five times, inter alia to "clear" Iraqi minefields [7]. Iraq's use of chemical weapons, including CS gas [8, 9, 5], increased losses to the Iranian army. It is quite obvious that the terrible consequences of these accidents affected the mental state not only of the attackers but also of the defenders.

### War trauma and possibilities of coping through art

Combat stress involves a huge amount of stressors [10]. These are physical stressors – hunger and dehydration, heat and cold, tiredness and lack of sleep, dirt, mud, dust in the air, noise, explosions, fumes, wounds, minor injuries and diseases. Cognitive stressors are lack or excess of information, ambiguously formulated tasks, difficulties in finding sense of action, often boredom and monotony. Emotional stressors involve above all, killing people, loss of colleagues, a sense of helplessness. Social stressors include lack of support, loneliness, lack of personal space and intimacy, exposure to constant contact with others. Spiritual stressors are usually related to the breakdown of faith in God due

to the horrors of war, the loss of a sense of security and faith in a just world. Combat stress is a type of multiple and cumulative trauma (type II of trauma according to Solomon and Heide [11]). War trauma, which overloads the adaptive mechanism of soldiers can cause psychopathological consequences [12, 13] and in particular can cause post-traumatic stress disorder.

An untreated post-traumatic stress disorder can last until the end of life, and result in a permanent change of personality. Moreover, self-aggressive or aggressive actions can be the consequences of war trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. Ford [14] describes three stories about veterans from Vietnam who, in connection to PTSD, murdered one or several people. Another of them attempted a bank robbery and taking hostages, which in fact was intended to be a suicide by the police. All mentioned men were considered to be *non compos mentis* perpetrators, and the context of the act evoked literal or symbolic elements of their trauma.

It is worth mentioning that many methods are used to treat the consequences of combat stress. Apart from pharmacotherapy [15, 16], psychotherapeutic methods include exposure therapy using virtual reality [17], peer support programs [18, 19] and family support programs [20, 21]. Art therapy also brings very promising results in the therapy of war trauma [4].

Drawing is the one of the oldest forms of human communication. Since prehistoric times, paintings and signs have been expressing the thoughts and experiences of their creators. Before the phonetic language was developed, people tended to communicate by using pictorial symbols – pictograms. Furthermore, in childhood development, scribbling and attempts to express ourselves through drawing often appear earlier than development of speech [22] or at least it appears earlier than complex speech which enables the child to express complex content. In psychotherapy, drawing can be used as a diagnostic tool, enabling the person to learn about emotional conflicts, hidden motives and subconscious needs. Moreover, it can have therapeutic function, as it can allow expression of feelings, help with communicating what is difficult to express in words, or gaining insight into emotional problems of the individual. The drawing can be treated as a projection technique by

which painful and difficult spheres can be activated and expressed in relatively safe manner. In psychotherapy, it can be used to relieve fear, tension, anger, grief or regret. It allows the individual to deal with these feelings, regain control over their mental experiences and strengthen the sense of identity. However, it should be noted that drawing, as a diagnostic tool, should be used in conjunction with observation, commentary during drawing and with other methods of psychological diagnosis.

### Analysis of drawings and accompanying inscriptions<sup>1</sup>

This study is an attempt to analyze the changes in the content and form of the amateur drawings of the frontline soldier<sup>5</sup> to understand them in the context of mental health recovery process. Much is known about the effectiveness of formal art therapy in the treatment of war veterans; the Farouk case allows obtaining unique knowledge of artistic expression (of a pictorial and verbal nature) as a form of spontaneous self-help in a situation of war trauma.

### DRAWINGS ANALYSIS

Reneé Klish in her book [2] grouped the works of artists – soldiers thematically (inter alia “A Soldier’s Life” including chapters “Camp Life” and “On the Move”; “A Soldier’s Duty”; “A Soldier’s Sacrifice” ). Farouk’s drawings are difficult to assign to any category, because they are too abstract. People who have experienced traumatic experiences often have problems verbalizing them [4]. This phenomenon can be explained in at least two different ways: it can be considered as the result of repression of especially threatening material, or it can be assumed as the lack of adequate mental verbal representation of (or mental narration about) an extremely unusual situation. For this reason some deeply traumatized people are looking for other means of expression than words, like music or drawing. In this case insight into their mental state is possible only indirectly by recognition of emo-

tional state of an author and, in case of drawings, by deciphering symbolic meaning of their components.

The shapes in Farouk’s drawings seem to resemble war machines. Man is only a small part of this machine, necessary for its functioning but hidden in its interior. Man turns on and operates the machine, but doesn’t make decisions, because he acts on the basis of the orders received. In this machine, his humanity is lost, he becomes another element, a cog, an object. He loses his subjectivity and individuality. In all Farouk’s drawings one can notice a structure resembling a spider web that can symbolize the situation of deadly imprisonment. Distorted, sad or frightened faces or eyes are woven into this web.

Face is something uniquely human and personal [23], distinguishing a person from other primates and other people, it is also a communication medium that gives the best insight into the realm of emotions. The way Farouk depicts human faces can be interpreted as a manifestation of negative affect and loss of humanity. The feeling of being lost is indicated by the presence of question marks in many drawings.

It is also worth noting that in a few drawings the arrangement of dashes, “filling” smaller elements of the sketch, suggests bandaging. This can be seen especially in Figure 1, on which in this characteristic manner “hands” and “legs” were marked. Such a way of drawing can be considered a metaphor of injury or trauma. The “bandaged” area includes a significant part of the “figure”. If it is assumed that we are dealing with a person who suffered injuries, the “sick” condition seems to be serious, requiring long-term convalescence.

### TEXT ANALYSIS

In the analyzed drawings and the poem, as can be expected, there are many words referring to death, suffering and negative emotions. In the first 101-words fragment of the poem (before the word “alternative”), which is a record of war experiences, nine words or phrases (war, absurd, death, explosion, shooting, wild feelings, cursed words, guns, damn) create an affectively nega-

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, some inscriptions in Arabic could not be read; the others have been translated by Translation Street.

tive climate. In addition, words such as tears, black roads, wild language, police, cruelty, hell, and flames appear in the drawings. However, the author lacks words, and they don't help him deal with the trauma, what he openly admits in the following fragment of his poem (see Appendix):

Sometimes you try to write about  
what is going on  
hoping the words live up to your  
wild feelings  
but the cursed words do not help you  
any more  
Every time words escape from you  
and fade away  
like the smoke of the dull guns fades  
away

Due to the fact that one sentence – “a bubble was born from glass falling into flames” – is repeated literally on three drawings (numbers: 1, 4 and 7), it seems to be the phrase of particular importance for the author. Its beginning suggests that we are dealing with the emergence of a new being or a new quality (“born”). At the same time, the circumstances of “birth” are dramatic: falling glass and flames suggest the effects of an explosion or shelling and are obviously associated with warfare. Blobs or blisters are also objects that can swell. They gradually increase their volume, usually due to gas or liquid accumulated inside them. Many diseases and injuries have, among their external symptoms, the formation of bubbles or blisters. For example, burns, insect bites or skin diseases. However, the bubble is also a kind of “packaging”, a kind of “container” filled with substances that we don't deal with everyday (such as serum in case of burns).

### Dealing with war trauma as a process

Statements (both pictorial and verbal) by Farouk indicate that he has tried for a long time to cope with the stress of the war. It is significant that his ability to “tame” the combat stress gradually increased. Initially, as the author of the drawings wrote in the text “In the time of war”, “the cursed words” did not help express his emotions and war experiences. It was probably a new and frustrating feeling for him. Thus the first part of

the poem ends with the phrase “Damn. What is the alternative?”. It seems that drawing was the only possible form of expression for Farouk in 1982. Pictures 2 and 3 were probably created on the battlefield (in July and August 2, 1982). It is notable that the first one contains the signature and date only. The picture dated 2.8.1982, entitled “Berber history”, contains only one sentence, the supplication: “Glory be upon You, take me away”. It can be said that this appeal indicates the greatest intensity of stress. The author begs for the possibility of finding himself away from the battlefield, and the “vehicle” that is to move him to a better world. In Figure 4, created after the Ramadan al-Mubarak Operation, there are many more additions. Whereas, sketch No. 7, dated 1999 and entitled “Stupid thoughts”, is full of comments. In addition to those that refer to the above-mentioned “bubble”, it's worth paying attention to the fragment “I translate the soul, I associate it with hope; how narrow life would be if it were not for a scrap of hope”. It is hard to resist the impression that over a dozen years after the war, the author of these words is still struggling with war memories. Perhaps he is still trying to “explain” to himself the state of his spirit during war events. These efforts are accompanied by hope. The word “hope” has been mentioned twice in a short sentence, which indicates a gradual “taming” of experiences and a stance of looking into the future.

Of course, the most comprehensive statement by Farouk was formulated by him 35 years after the war in 2017. It is a dramatic and moving pronouncement, which testifies to the author's insight into his own psychological mechanisms. The author says that for years he did not remember the drawings that were waiting to be discovered in the library. Drawings, like memories, have “disappeared from consciousness” for several decades. For a psychologist, taking into account the context of events, it is obvious that it was the result of suppression of threatening material. However, Farouk himself seems to be aware of this mechanism for forgetting of removing war events from his episodic memory. What's more, he formulated an accurate insight that smaller and larger “wars” are still taking place in his mind. Particularly noteworthy in the context of the effectiveness of self-therapy is the fact that Farouk himself admitted that

he didn't win any of them, because he didn't tell anyone about his traumatic experiences for a very long time.

The process of Farouk's struggle with war trauma can be analyzed in the frames of many psychological theories; we will use some ideas of a quite new cognitive-evolutionary approach. According to the cognitive-evolutionary approach, a man is recognized as a biological system, whose actions are directed toward achieving an essential goal, which is maximizing his inclusive fitness [24] by survival and reproduction. In "normal", peaceful conditions this goal is achieved usually by the cooperation with others, which is accompanied by appropriate mental schemata and other representations including the subjective narratives concerning peaceful "self" and the peaceful world. War, however, changes almost everything and makes it necessary to establish new goals, new mental schemata of action and narratives concerning the "hostile" self and the hostile world.

But before a new mental order is achieved and adequate narratives constructed, there is chaos in internal representations which can lead to problems with verbalization of current situation and depersonalization. In such a situation, the current narrative, which is verbal, is not adequate to describe and explain war experiences, and more primitive visual representations of reality, at different level of concreteness, are only possible ones. In a sense, from cognitive-evolutionary perspective, it is a step back (regression or infantilization) to the older both ontogenetically and phylogenetically forms of mental representation.

In the sketches, created probably on the front (No. 2 and 3) there are very few figurative elements. The mental chaos makes verbal statements impossible. The commentary "Love, glory, take me to you" appears on drawing no. 3, which can be interpreted as a manifestation the highest level of stress and the desire – almost childish – to "escape" to the world of love. Figurative elements appear gradually (eg. in the form of boats and trees) on subsequent, later drawings. As time goes on, the author also begins to describe war reality with the help of words. This can be interpreted as an attempt to rebuild a coherent personal narrative.

As studies show, the possibilities of coping with combat stress and its consequences increase

if the individual receives social support [25-27]. In the case of Farouk, as he wrote himself, sharing his own experiences with combat companions was impossible. Because "words left him" the only option to externalize internal states was drawing. After the war, author forgot the sketches he made, probably due to the repression mechanism observed in many war veterans. It must have been 35 years since 1982, before Farouk managed to open and share drawings with others. Apparently until then, "touching the trauma bubble" was too painful for him.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of amateur creativity of war veterans can be valuable for several reasons. First of all, it is an example of narrative approach in psychology which, in our opinion, is hastily marginalized, as not fully scientific. Neo-positivist reductionism in psychological methodology results, *inter alia*, in losing insight into first-person, subjective perspective of perceiving and experiencing phenomena. This perspective is crucial in psychotherapy. Fortunately, during the last three decades, the narrative trend is more and more visible in the research of psychologists [28-34].

Second, the analysis of works such as drawings or poems seems to be helpful for diagnosis and therapy. Especially because in cases of people who experienced trauma, a verbalization of experiences is difficult. Therefore, an analysis of artistic expressions may constitute the first stage of contact between therapist and patient. Based on the Farouks' case, it can be concluded that encouraging people who have a problem with speaking about their traumas, to express themselves by drawing or painting can be helpful. Research shows that for many veterans, the possibility of expression through creativity is very important and promotes recovery.

Participants of war experience deep trauma, which they try to deal with in various ways. The trauma – if they don't receive professional help – can leave long-term consequences in the form of posttraumatic stress disorder. PTSD syndrome is associated with serious emotional tensions, anxiety and depression. It can be also the cause of personality changes and aggressive

behavior [14]. This behavior is in many cases unreasonable, directed at random people, with a high level of brutalization. War trauma is experienced in an extremely painful way – in isolation, because in the face of the direct threat of death everyone is lonely. It consists not only of the threat of death, but also of witnessing the death of other people, injuries, fatigue, deprivation of many needs, the necessity of strict execution of orders, the feeling of being part of ruthless war machine, the obligation to kill enemies. To rebuild the mental balance after the trauma of war, it is necessary to regain autonomy, the ability to decide about oneself, manage one's life, live according to professed values, which after traumatic experiences require reconstruction and new hierarchy. Questions about identity arise, and the term "who I am" after the war experience – during which the soldier was brave and cowardly, heroic and despicable, bestial and friendly – takes on a fundamental meaning.

Even if amateur creativity of traumatized people, "taming bubble of trauma", is not the optimal strategy to achieve full recovery, it is undoubtedly valuable for researchers in understanding the coping process. We suggest – on the basis of Farouk's case and on the literature concerning coping with war trauma – that the level of abstractness of drawings may indicate the depth of trauma and that the recovery process is also accompanied by an increase in the ability to verbalize traumatic experiences. The process of verbalization is necessary to reconstruct and adjust to reality internal narratives concerning self and the world.

In our opinion enhancing patients to express their traumatic experiences in the form of drawings with comments, can be a useful tool of diagnosis and therapy. We think, given into account the limitations on patient-therapist contact time, that creating "drawings with inscriptions" can be also the useful form of autotherapy.

The fact that soldiers like Farouk find means of expression to relieve painful experiences testifies to human resilience, but it does not replace professional psychological and psychiatric assistance available to veterans.

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*Appendix*

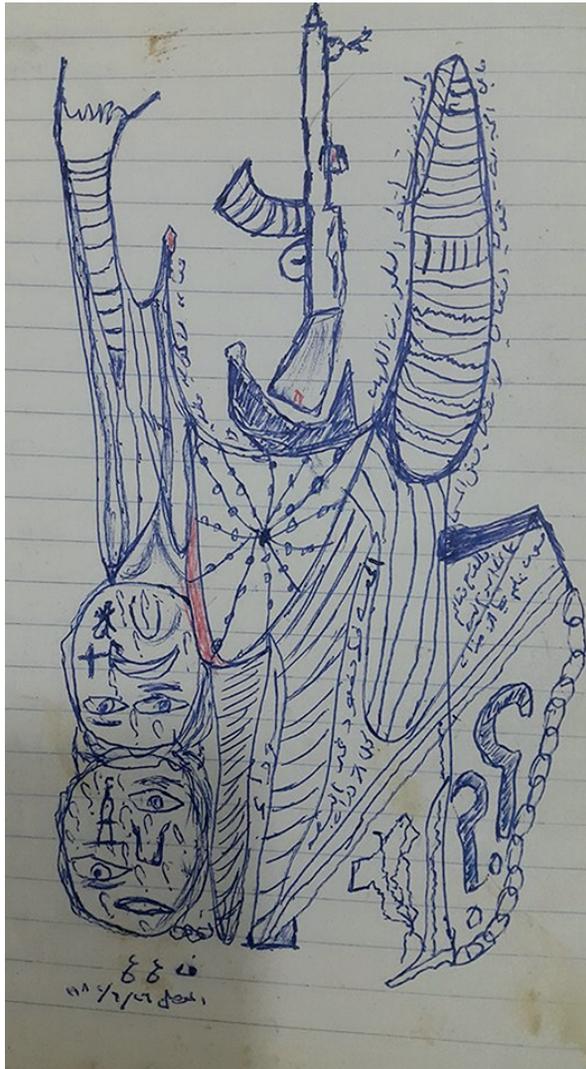


Figure 1. Mosul, 26.06.1982

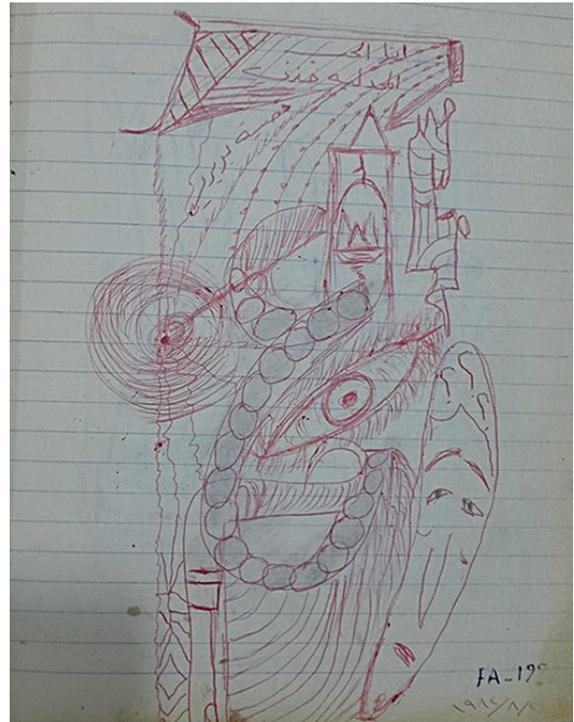


Figure 3. 2.08.1982

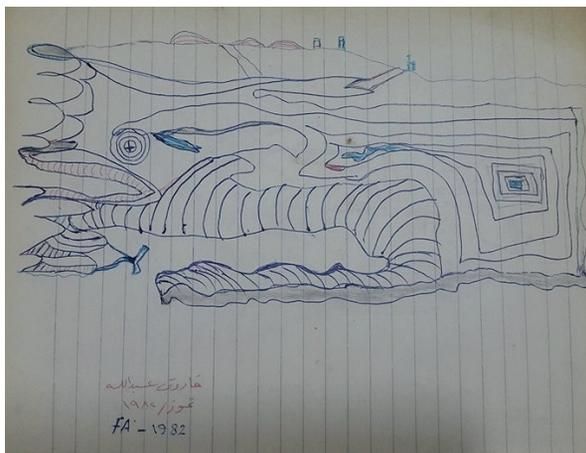


Figure 2. July 1982

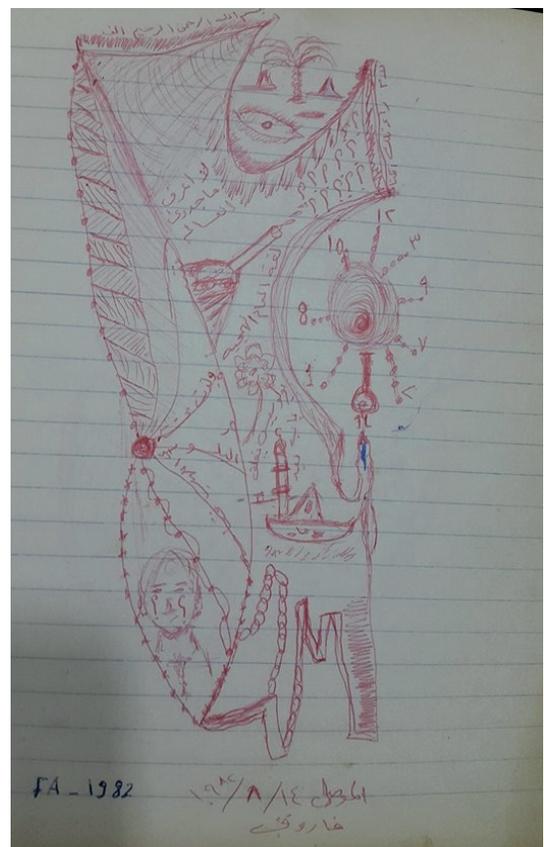


Figure 4. 14.08.1982



Figure 5. 18.08.1982

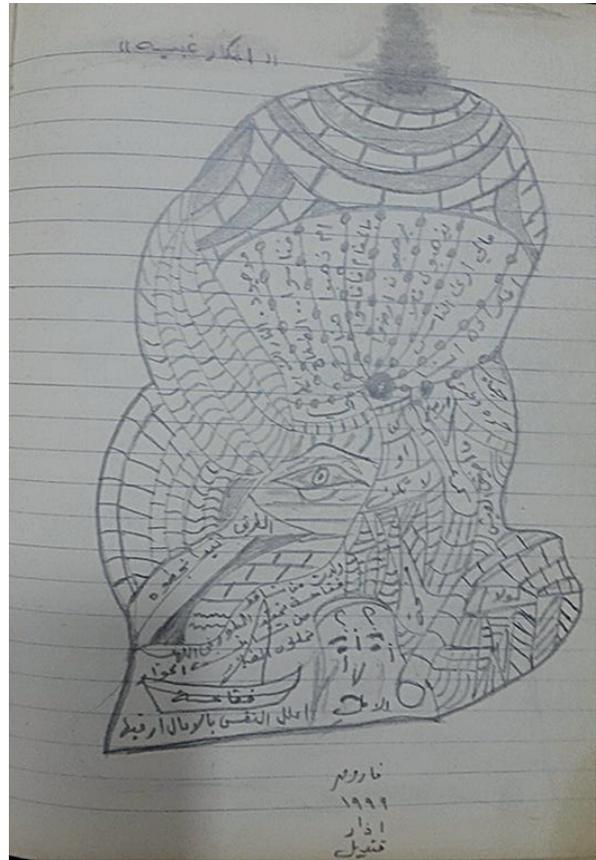


Figure 7. March 1999



Figure 6. Farouk 1982

“In the time of war” by Farouk (2017; an original version – Arabic)

يشالتي شيح رقص نمزلا شيح ببحرلا نامز يف  
 قدحاو قطن يف روحمتت ةيؤرلا شيحو دوجولا  
 شدحلا راضتناب ينعم الب سافنالا عراسنت  
 دمجتت شيح تواملاو ةايحل نيب حجراتملا يثبعلا  
 ديدج راجفنا لك عم رعاشملا يشالنتو سيساحلا  
 كلوحو يريج امع بتكت نا لواحت انايح ران قالطاو  
 ةشايحلا كرعاشم فاصم ىلا يقرت تاملكلا لعل  
 لك يفو كفعبستال ةنيعللا فورحلا نكل ةجئاهلا  
 ناخذ يشالتي امك يشالنتو تاملكلا كنم رفت قرم  
 يل نا تركذت؟ نذا ليديللم ةنعللا لمملا عفادملا  
 انا كاذنا اهتبسح تاونس ذنم مسرلا يف قبرجت  
 قريصق قبرجت تنك كلت رثكال تاشبرخ درجم  
 كلذل رعاشملا نول او سيساحلا مسرا نا اهيف تلواح  
 مسرا نا تررق ينترجه يتلا تاملكلا نم الدبو  
 ناك نم ضعب باجعا موسرلا مده تلانف تمسرف  
 يف قريخ اذ مهنم ضعبلا ناك شيح قدنخل يف يعم  
 نع تحار امامت اهتيسن شيح تاونس ترمو مسرلا  
 ةنم ام ناكم يف تفتخاو يتركاذ نم تشالتو يلاب  
 عيش نع شحبا تنك امدنع ةاجفو ةيسنمو قرتسم  
 تاقيرولا مده ىلع ترثع ةميدقلا يتبتكم يف ام  
 يتلا يتركاذ نم عزج ىلع ترثع يننا تفتشكاو

