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## Letters to Samira (7)

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The seventh in a series of letters written by Yassin al-Haj Saleh to his missing wife, Samira al-Khalil, who was kidnapped in Douma in December 2013.

Sammour, you remember when I was about to move to my first apartment in Istanbul; I moved to that apartment four days after your abduction, and lived in it for about twenty-one months. I've been living in another apartment for around two years now. Both are relatively spacious, more or less like our apartment in Qudsaya Suburb, so there is space to host a couple of people, or three if necessary. Both are furnished, and I found them through friends, not real-estate agencies. In this regard, I have not faced the difficulties most Syrians face, whether families or independent young people.

But both apartments are places to live, not homes, Sammour. I live in them as if I were a university student in a foreign city, and all I have in them is my books, clothes and two computers. I also have two portraits of you, and many gifts which I bought for you from the cities I visited, or which friends sent to you. It was you who made homes of the places we lived in, in Qudsaya Suburb. In your absence, I became the itinerant nomad I used to be.

Both apartments, however, were good places for work. Working has not only helped me endure your absence, Sammour, but it has also helped me stay balanced (I hope I'm not too wrong about this) and reasonably healthy. I have received enormous help from Syrian and Turkish friends, without whom the situation would have been incomparably more difficult. They are partners in work, and in the cause, as well as in various aspects of everyday life.

Syrians, numbering about 400,000 in Istanbul, have taken up residence in many different neighborhoods: the poor live in poorer neighborhoods; the workers among them live close to their place of work; the conservatives live in

conservative neighborhoods; the young, middle-class independents live in 'cosmopolitan' neighborhoods where their Turkish and foreign counterparts live. The first apartment I lived in was part of a residential complex in a middle-class neighborhood; the second is in a slightly more working-class, but mixed, area. The funny thing is that the first apartment belonged to a Turkish woman—a novelist and yoga instructor—who was living in the US, and I sub-rented the second from an American woman living in Turkey.

I still know too little of Istanbul, Sammour. The city is huge, with eighteen million inhabitants, and it's hard even for those born there to know all its areas and neighborhoods, let alone the foreigners who arrive at a relatively late age. I have hardly found time to stroll around the city or even visit its major landmarks. My friends and I joke that I would never have visited Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, or the Basilica Cistern were it not for the visit of Farouk Mardam Bey, the friend whom I had not met in person till he came to Istanbul in 2014. I accompanied Farouk, who loves historical tourism, reading about the landmarks in advance of his visits, on his tours during his two trips to Istanbul. Farouk, a resident of France for more than half a century, was my guide in the city in which I'd lived for almost four years.

The Basilica Cistern, a huge underground water container, was the one I liked most of the city's historical attractions. It was built in the sixth century A.D. to provide the city with water in times of siege (please, Sammour, take my historical information with a grain of salt). And in this cistern are huge stone columns, the bases of two of which are carved with the visages of a Gorgon (Medusa), which is a mythological female creature with hair made of agitated

snakes. Legend has it that whoever looks at her turns to stone. In this place, visitors traditionally throw a coin and make a wish.

I threw many coins, and wished for nothing except your safe return, Sammour. As they have come to do often, my tears fell down in that chilly and dark historical site, while the noble Farouk pretended not to notice.

The area I know best in Istanbul is Taksim, the heart of the European side of the city. Taksim is the name of a large square, named after the system of water distribution (Arabic taqseem) that supplied water to the districts of Istanbul in bygone times. In the square stands a statue of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in military uniform surrounded by a group of warriors or military leaders. The portraits and statues of Atatürk are all over Istanbul and Turkey, Sammour, but I've never seen any resembling the scarecrows that are the statues of Hafez al-Assad. In his portraits and statues, "the Conqueror" (as Atatürk is nicknamed) always looks as though in a state of action, engaged in something, including drinking araq. He really has portraits of himself drinking araq, and this heavy imbiber died of liver cirrhosis before turning sixty. Hafez, by contrast, always looks lifeless in his heavy statues, like an 'ogre' implanting fear in Syrians, whose only purpose was indeed to provoke panic and paralyze the people who were frightened by an authority which loves itself to this extent. Moreover, the statues of Atatürk were erected after his death, while Hafez was the one who distributed copies of himself everywhere throughout immiserated Syria. More importantly, Sammour, it is very common to see Atatürk within a group of people in his statues, whereas, as you know, all the statues of Hafez were of him alone. Hafez

exercised the authority of the single despot whose essence is fear, whereas Atatürk, who was a nationalist and authoritarian ruler whose regime committed many crimes, appears in spite of this to be practicing life.

With a metro station pumping people up to it, Taksim Square looks like a lake from which springs forth the famous Istiklal Street. This street is truly a river of people, especially on Friday and Saturday evenings (the weekend is Saturday and Sunday in Turkey); it's estimated that three million people pass through it each day. In my early days and months in Istanbul, I used to like that street, particularly the spectacle of young men and women late into the night at the bars and restaurants along its side-streets. In those days, Istiklal seemed to me a street of love and youth. Today it seems more like a commercial street, where the flowing river of people runs, and standing still is impossible and almost prohibited. On Istiklal Street itself there are no popular cafes or bars, or movie theaters or cultural centers that attract pedestrians and tempt them to stop. There are clothes shops, including well-known international brands, and fast-food takeaway restaurants. There are also Turkish restaurants that you can see from the outside, where you choose the dishes you want and take them on a tray to a table inside.

However, the crowded street is famous for street music, including Syrian musicians who play and sing popular Syrian and Arabic songs, and to whom the pedestrians give some money. My impression is that Syrian musicians are popular, because you see larger audiences gathered around them than others; audiences, including Arabs, who film them and enjoy their songs. There are diverse music groups, including some from Peru in the distinctive Native

American dress: not one feather on their heads, but a whole crown of feathers!

The musicians are the only ones who make people stop for a moment and slow down the speed of movement on the crowded street which otherwise drives people forward only. If Istiklal Street were a little slower, it would be much more beautiful.

At all times you hear Arabic in the streets, especially Syrian Arabic, and in the summer you hear and see tourists from the Gulf and Lebanon.

In the side-streets branching out from Istiklal, there is more life: cafes, and bars, and restaurants, and tables on the sidewalks. The scene of young people in the beer or tea cafes is full of life and joy. As for the well-known "Turkish coffee," it deserves neither the fame nor the name, in my opinion. I always say it's something you eat, not drink, because it's dense, and half of it's sediment. Our Syrian coffee tastes much better. Of course, the best coffee was the one I used to make for you, with the coffee on cold water, left long enough to boil on the lowest heat possible.

In these few streets that I know, I walked and thought of you, Sammour, and I described to you in my heart what I saw with my eyes. I sat alone, or with friends, but you were present in my mind and among us at all times.

You were with me too when I crossed the Bosphorus to the Asian side. There you also find areas like Taksim, such as Kadıköy (in Arabic: Qaryat al-Qadi; "the Judge's Village"), which I know less than Taksim, but which seems less commercial than Istiklal Street, and with a less frenetic pace. The best fish restaurants are found there. It seems

that artists, young people, and various cultural groups (theater, music bands, art exhibitions) prefer that part of the Asian side to Taksim on the European side.

There are three bridges linking the Asian and European banks, but I prefer to take the ferries which leave every half hour from several points. The journey takes twenty minutes, and the city, in its two sides, appears very beautiful for those with a clear mind.

Sammour, I hope to walk around with you and tell you about all these places soon.

Kisses, sweetheart. Just take care of yourself, please.

Yassin