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Letters to Samira (1)

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Note from the translator: In this letter, Yassin says that he is writing to and for Samira, but he adds that other disappeared friends might want to read it to understand what happened in their absence. I think everyone should read Yassin's letters to Samira, not only because they are a truly poignant portrayal of love and resilience, but also

because Samira and her story represent our shattered country, Syria, and our betrayed revolution, as Yassin himself once wrote in an article titled "Samira and Syria."

In your long and impenetrable prison, dearest Sammour, you might be wondering: how is it that I was not able to help you all this time? You must have thought that I could help, and here we are: three years and seven months have passed and you are still a hostage; you don't know anything about me, and I don't know anything about you. I will try to give you answers in this letter and few to come.

Your husband is still the same writer who has no "weapon" other than his words. You thought that I, you or Razan must have connections and know powerful people who could help. I thought that too. Well... I will tell you about this in time.

But first let me explain to you what happened in your absence; let me explain how it happened that my ability to help you, and to help myself in this cruel ordeal, was less than I had expected.

Sammour, I will assume that you are now coming out of the world of the disappeared and you want to know what had happened in your absence. To help you with this task, I am writing to you these letters. Read them with this intention in mind. I'm addressing them to you, and it is for you that I'm writing, but I assume Razan can read them as well; Wael and Nazem also; Fa'eq and Jihad who are still absent like you, but in the hands of the Assadist state; Firas and Ismael who are also still absent, but in the hands of Da'esh.

Sammour, you know I came to Ghouta in the beginning of April 2013. After a few days, two things happened: Da'esh sprang up from a split with al-Nusra Front which attracted jihadists from Arab countries - I saw one of them myself in Eastern Ghouta; a Saudi man, but I forgot his name. Second, Hezbollah intervened publicly to support the regime in al-Qusayr. This month [April] can be considered the formal beginning of a new layer heaped over the Syrian revolution; the layer of a regional Sunni-Shia conflict. We (you, Razan and I) had left Damascus at the beginning of a new phase in the Syrian revolution, when it had fully become an international question, the "Syrian question." Like most historical events, this was not clear to us or to others; people usually understand historical events only afterwards, and maybe a long time afterwards. I was in Raqqa in the summer of 2013 when I started to discern that the national framework of our struggle had already begun to collapse by the second half of 2012, which is a year after the beginning of the collapse. With the regime inviting Iranians, Iraqis and Lebanese to share in the killing feast with him, and with Sunni jihadis from dozens of countries showing up to participate in the killing as well, and with so many regional and international hands fueling the massacre, ours was no longer an Syrian-Syrian struggle. No one among us had paid attention to this shift before then or had tried to draw lessons from it.

Dearest Samira, the three of us (you, Razan and me) were in Ghouta when Sisi of Egypt overthrew the elected president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi took advantage of real public discontent, but after the coup, Egypt became a stronghold for counter-revolution in the region and a full-fledged supporter of the Assad regime.

You and Razan were in Douma, and I was in Raqqa, when the chemical massacre occurred. Razan documented the massacre in two reports issued by the Violation Documentation Center (VDC), and you were a witness and shared your testimony on your Facebook page. Wael and Nazim were still in Damascus at the time. There were no other witnesses like yourselves: two secular, non-local women who had a long record of opposing the regime, speaking clearly and plainly about the crime and its circumstances, perpetrators and victims.

Back then, and upon the request of an Egyptian human rights organization, I was writing a long article on the trajectory of the Syrian revolution and its fate after almost two and a half years since the start of the revolution (Sammour, you can find the article in my book *The Impossible Revolution* which came out [in Arabic] in Spring 2017, and it's dedicated to you and Syria). You know, Sammour, for some time it looked as though the regime would be eventually punished for its crimes, and I included this possibility in the list of possibilities back then. But while I was still writing the article, things started to shift towards diminishing the importance of punishing the regime, to the extent that John Kerry, then US Secretary of State, declared in London in the first week of September that if they were to carry out an attack against the regime, it would be unbelievably small! This is quite strange! The same self-proclaimed protectors of international law were informing a criminal who violated the international law that they might need to punish him, but they also reassured him that their punishment wouldn't harm him, and wouldn't touch his ability to commit more crimes!

Less than a week after Kerry's statement, they agreed with

Russia on a deal that stipulated that the regime give up its chemical weapons in return for its safety. Since the regime cherishes its safety, and its ability to continue killing, it gave up a large part of its chemical weapons stockpile. The US attested that the regime was very cooperative in the task of giving up these weapons.

The problem that the international community had with the regime was the violation of the law of the powerful, not the killing of the powerless. The regime -rightly- understood from the deal that it can use any method to kill its people except chemical weapons. The regime, indeed, understood that it can kill them with chemical weapons also, provided that it doesn't stir up a big scandal that might embarrass the US, which the regime knew better than we did. (The regime continued to retain a potentially large amount of chemical weapons, knowing that the American administration wanted to deceive itself in this matter).

Sammour, the regime did use chlorine gas in attacking many areas in the country after the chemical deal, which had been reportedly inspired by Israel, according to a former Israeli minister. But not only chlorine gas; Sarin too. Last April, the regime used Sarin gas in an attack on Khan Sheikhoun, killing around 100 people. The Trump administration responded (Donald Trump is the American president elected after Obama, he is truly an animal, even though the best thing he has done so far is calling Bashar Assad an animal!). What was the American response to our animal? They hit the Shayrat Airbase, from where the chemical attack against Khan Sheikhoun had been launched, but they had also informed Russia about the attack and the latter, of course, immediately informed the regime. (Are you disgusted, Sammour? It's okay, but we

haven't started yet, so you better overcome this feeling!). Apparently the American airstrike only caused material damage to the Assad regime.

You know, Sammour, the regime expanded its use of barrel bombs after the chemical deal. I don't know if Eastern Ghouta was attacked with barrel bombs right after the chemical massacre, but I saw with my own eyes barrel bombs tumbling from helicopters on Raqqa in August and September 2013. Those barrels were equipped with parachutes to slow down their fall; I don't know why, or if all barrel bombs were the same. The terrifying thing about barrel bombs is that you can't predict where they will fall or where you should hide.

Sammour, you heard, like I did, and you probably also read (before your disappearance) about the Friends of Syria Group, a group of countries who were supposed to help the Syrian people from outside the UN which was paralyzed by the Russian and Chinese vetoes in the Security Council. Those were the last days anyone heard about this group. The American administration led the group to its end; their commitment to the Israeli-inspired chemical deal was stronger than any other commitment to the Syrian people or their commitment to justice.

After a while, and before the end of September 2013, another important event happened: Liwa' al-Islam (Brigade of Islam), the faction you know in Douma, promoted itself to an army, and its name became Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam). They were associated with Saudi Arabia and received financial support from them; the same Saudi Arabia who, upon the orders of the American administration, prevented the opposition fighters from

entering Damascus around the end of 2012; there was a strong momentum then, and the downfall of the regime was actually possible. Jaysh al-Islam was at best a pawn in the Sunni-Shia conflict, and not part of the Syrian revolution. At worst, Jaysh al-Islam was a narrow-minded local power player that thought of itself an autonomous entity, relying on a regional supporter that itself lacked autonomy: Saudi Arabia.

Sammour, we were planning to get you out of Ghouta and go to Damascus, and we had friends who worked on this, among them was the late Mahmoud Modallal (Abo Murshid). Do you know that Abo Morshid was killed? Alas, he left us in April 2015 in a double-tap strike on Harasta. The regime hit an area, and then when the rescuers arrive to the scene they hit it again. Sammour, Abo Murshid left us. He joined his martyred son.

Do you know that Abo Saeed has died also? Do you remember him? We stayed up at his place in al-Malihah a few days after you arrived in Ghouta in May 2013. Abo Saeed had fixed me with my first fake ID, remember?

Do you know that Abo Elezz lost his life also? Perhaps you don't remember him. He was on his way to Jordan when he was killed in an ambush with others.

Sammour, they left. The good people left.

I wanted to write to you about what happened after your disappearance only, but it seemed right to recall those events as an introduction.

I will continue in another letter. Please take care of yourself.

Kisses sweetheart,
Yassin