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Francesca Scalinci

Wejdan Nassif, a friend and former cellmate of Samira al-Khalil, the Syrian democracy activist imprisoned by Hafez al-Assad and then abducted by Islamists, recalls their time together inside and outside prison.

> “Like Syria, Samira is my cause, the cause of freedom.”
> – Yassin al-Haj Saleh

Three years ago, at precisely the time of the year I now write this article, I found myself in a northern European town, where I had come to meet Wejdan Nassif. Nassif is a writer and teacher. She is also a comrade, best friend, and former prison mate of the Syrian democracy activist Samira al-Khalil, who has been missing since her abduction in Douma, outside Damascus, in 2013. Nassif dedicated a whole day to me. For hours, we walked side by side under a cold drizzle, surrounded by Christmas lights and smells, our fingers and noses freezing. For hours, I listened attentively to Wejdan telling me about her youth. Though our bodies were in Europe, our minds and hearts were in Syria.

It is above all thanks to Wejdan that I can now write this article. I could never express enough gratitude for the way she opened the door of her house and her own life to me.

A preamble

I have often wondered how my interest—soon transmuted into admiration and love—for Samira al-Khalil began. It happened more than three years ago. Along with Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamade, and Nazem Hammadi, Samira is one of four activists collectively known as the “Douma 4” who were kidnapped in Douma in December 2013, ~~most likely~~ by the Jaysh al-Islam armed faction. None has been seen or heard from since. I was intrigued by the individual lives behind that “Douma 4” label. Due to her activity as a lawyer and her commitment to documenting human rights violations, Razan Zaitouneh was the best-known of the four, internationally. Samira, by contrast, stood a little bit in the background; something quite typical of her personality, as I

later learned. Perhaps because of this, I yearned to know her story and the secret behind that bright smile and those shiny eyes. Almost all the pictures of her in the public domain show her smiling. There was something warm and familiar in Samira's smile, something perhaps reminding me of my own mother's smile. I think I recognized that smile straight away: it is the smile of those who never lose hope; the smile of those born to give comfort and spread warmth wherever they go.

At about the same time, I started nurturing doubts about the usefulness of my activism. In late 2016, Aleppo fell back into the hands of the Assad regime, and the same was starting to happen in the other once-liberated areas. Despite demonstrations and petitions to our European governments, Syrians were still being killed and displaced daily. Hope—still alive just one year previously—had started to crumble under the harsh reality of an international community deaf and blind to the legitimate demands of the Syrian people. In addition, Syrian revolution supporters were more divided than ever. I wanted to quit: everything we did seemed absolutely useless and self-referential. But just as you cannot tear your heart out of your chest, I could not simply erase Syria and Syrians from my life. Syrians had become my people, and by them I had to stand. It was then I decided that, if there was anything I could do, it was to contribute to saving the memory of the Syrian revolution, a memory that was slowly starting to be eroded and "replaced" by the so-called winners' version.

Samira became my project, and I decided to write a book about her. After reading all the available material about her, I contacted ~~Yassin al-Haj Saleh~~, in his double role as Samira's beloved husband and one of the most renowned

Syrian writers and thinkers in exile. Having Yassin explain Syria to me and share about Samira is a privilege for which I can never be thankful enough. I feel honored beyond my capacity to express it. It was also thanks to Yassin that I was introduced to Wejdan Nassif, one of Samira's former cellmates and friends, as well as to one of Samira's nieces, Alwajd. My intention was initially to interview several people from Samira's family and friend circle. After the first conversations, however, things got tougher. In my naivety, I had not foreseen the contrasting and painful feelings awakened by the disappearance of a loved one. As foreign as they were to me, these feelings are unfortunately known to many Syrian families whose relatives have suddenly disappeared through arbitrary detention or abduction. As Yassin has often pointed out, unlike the pain caused by death, the suffering of those whose loved ones have disappeared is inversely proportional to the passing of time: the more time passes, the sharper it gets.

Thus, as time went by and Samira became a part of my life, I started to be more self-conscious and aware of the suffering of all those who love her. So sharp was the suffering I detected in my interlocutors' eyes that I decided to retrace my steps and set my project aside, at least for a while. Nonetheless, I knew Samira's story needed to be told, and I feel almost a moral obligation to finally share what I have been able to learn over the last three years.

A symbol of two generations

In general, whenever the name of Samira al-Khalil comes up, it is usually in connection with her abduction in Douma

in 2013. Sometimes, mention is also made of her activism there, and her experience of the siege imposed on the area by the Assad regime, which she documented thoroughly in her precious book, Journal of the 2013 Siege of Douma, published in Arabic in 2016. However, to me Samira is so much more than that. As a foreign activist who has devoted part of her life to supporting Syrians in their sometimes-desperate fight for freedom, Samira—or Sammour, as her loved ones affectionately call her—is in many ways a powerful symbol of Syria and its struggle. This has been pointed out repeatedly by Yassin al-Haj Saleh himself, and somehow, in my mind, Samira is Syria and Syria is Samira. To further explore Samira's symbolic capacity, I shall reflect below on some events from Samira's life that precede those we are used to hearing and reading about. As Yassin wrote in a ~~recent article~~, we don't know much about Samira's new life in her absence, but the story of her prior life, when present, is indeed worth being told.

First of all, Samira is a symbol of the trans-generational struggle of the Syrian people against an oppressive power. In truth, the Syrian revolution did not start in 2011. Its seeds were planted long before, in the time of Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, by a host of political opponents who, in different ways, began to erode the authoritarian foundations of the Baath Party and, above all, of the Assad family's rule. The two key events of Samira's own life, politically—her incarceration in Douma as an active member of the Action Party in 1987, under Hafez al-Assad; and her abduction, again in Douma, 26 years later, at the hands of Islamists—reflect the way she represents these two generations of revolutionaries. Over a period of thirty years, Samira moves between and touches two poles of Syrian oppression and struggle.

Besides symbolizing the continuity of Syria's fight for freedom, Samira is also an emblem of its trans-sectarian nature. The Syrian revolution has often been perceived as "Sunni" or even "Islamist." If, on the one hand, it is true that the majority of revolution supporters were and are Sunni (Sunnis being Syria's largest religious demographic), on the other hand, people from all religious communities took part in Syria's protests, especially in the early years. As a member herself of the Alawite minority (from which the Assad family also hails), Samira affirms that overthrowing the power that has narcissistically ruled Syria for over five decades was, and still is, the interest of all the ethnic, religious, and social groups that form the Syrian kaleidoscope.

Last but not least, in my opinion Samira symbolizes Syrian women, and their struggle for a just society, in the construction of which all genders can equally, fully, and effectively participate. As we will see, activism on the one hand, and personal decisions on the other, were just two of the ways Samira quietly but resolutely challenged the pre-established patriarchal order and asserted her freedom and independence.

The Action Party

Under Hafez al-Assad, all independent political parties and activities were outlawed.Syria's 1972 Constitution declared the Baath Party "the leading party in the society and state" of Syria. The same year, a so-called "National Progressive Front" was created, theoretically allowing a limited number of approved "loyal opposition" parties to exist. None was

permitted to challenge the Baath Party's primacy, nor the Assad dynasty's right to rule. Total devotion to the Eternal Leader was the only de facto acceptable political expression. Political dissent—which certainly existed—was met with merciless repression. If the Muslim Brotherhood represented the Islamist face of the opposition, the communist parties represented the secularists. During the 1970s and 1980s in particular, young Syrians attracted to words and concepts like "proletariat," "working class," "Marxism," and "Leninism" gravitated towards the Syrian Communist Action Party, first founded in 1976 as the League for Communist Action.

The regime spent the 1980s crushing all voices of dissent, most dramatically in the infamous massacre of tens of thousands in the city of Hama in 1982. The Communist Action Party felt its own share of the regime's wrath, and went through a major ordeal in 1987, when over 200 of its members were arrested. The more members were jailed, the more information obtained through arrests and torture brought new arrests. The entire party structure collapsed over the course of just a few months. The chief accusation against members was "conspiring against the goals of the revolution" (meaning the coup d'état of 8 March, 1963, that brought Baathist army officers to power) and undermining the state. Almost nobody was actually brought to court or sentenced; if they were, it was often years after they had been arbitrarily detained. Yassin al-Haj Saleh himself, for example, who was active in the Syrian Communist Party-Political Bureau, spent more than eleven years in prison between 1980 and 1992 before being sentenced in court, after which he remained jailed for another five years.

Like many young women aspiring to a better Syria and a

new world, Samira joined the Action Party, together with her sister Fatima and the latter's husband. These bright youths were attracted to the party's values, which might simplistically be described as emphasizing the struggle of the working class; equality; social justice; and the fair use and allocation of economic resources. In this young group full of idealism, differences in social, ethnic, and religious categories seemed to disappear. Party members hailed from all stripes of Syrian society: Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, and Christians, all united under the same ideals.

Born in the village of al-Mukharram, east of Homs, Samira was the daughter of an Alawite farmer and a housewife. She devoted her youthful years to political activism, but in a very unobtrusive, low-profile way. As many of those who knew her have emphasized, this has always been Samira's personality: she loves doing useful things while remaining in the background, without attracting attention to herself. In the pre-Internet era, she participated in the party's activities and meetings, which centered around calling for democracy and bringing down the dictatorship, according to her friend Wejdan. Samira was very active, but, like Wejdan, she disliked reading theoretical books and arguing over ideological issues. Instead, she preferred dealing with people directly; talking to them in plain language; and helping out by transferring messages, letters, and the party's literature to various areas. For example, she used to travel from Damascus to Hama and back again carrying letters, leaflets, and copies of the party's secret newspaper. Given her slender physique, it is impressive how much she could hide under hercoat.

The arrest

In September 1987, Samira was arrested.Samira’s sister arrived in Douma two years later. In prison, Samira was often worried about the continued political activity of her sister and brother-in-law. Some of the women comrades who would become her best friends in Douma prison were arrested around the same time. They included Lina Wafai, Wejdan Nassif, Hind Kahwaji, and Nahed Badawiya. Of course there were many others, but these are the ones that can be reached and are able to tell us the story, as they have all become refugees. The others are still in Syria, condemned to silence.

Arrests, carried out by security agents, could happen anywhere at any time. As Touhama Ma’arouf, one of the party’s more renowned members, noted in an interview, it was not uncommon for a person to be suddenly abducted on the street. This is, indeed, what happened to Ma’arouf herself. Most of those arrested were taken first to the infamous Branch 235 (a.k.a. the “Palestine Branch”) in Damascus; the investigative branch for political prisoners. There, people were interrogated and, more often than not, forced to confess to elaborate plots through torture, without ever seeing a courtroom. Their families usually got no notice of the arrest. There was no set time period for a prisoner’s detention in the Palestine Branch. Wejdan, for instance, was left there for six months. Arrested one month after Samira, in October 1987, she stayed in the Branch until March 1988. She recalls the conditions being awful: it was always cold, with no warm, clean water; prisoners could not shower; and were left with the same clothes for months. These horrible hygiene conditions led naturally to the spread of diseases, especially scabies and lice. Wejdan

cannot remember changing her clothes once in the whole time she was there. It was in this Branch that she first met Samira.

As far as is known, after her arrest, Samira was sent to Damascus and then to Douma. Usually, the regular police administered prisons, but political prisoners fell under the jurisdiction of the Palestine Branch. Detainees were typically transferred by bus in small groups, not knowing in advance where they were headed. As their small bus left Damascus, prisoners were often seized by the fear, even terror, of being taken to Tadmor or other infamous Syrian prisons, notorious for extreme forms of torture and dehumanization. Wejdan, a Druze from Suwayda, remembers that trip well. “On the coach, I met a Druze policeman from Suwayda. He insulted me and told me I was a shame to my community […] I kept on asking where we were going.”

Life in Douma prison

Compared to the Palestine Branch, Douma prison was another world, says Touhama Ma’arouf. Whereas the former was a subterranean jail, Douma prison was a building with an internal yard from which the sky could at least be seen. Wejdan recounts how the women political prisoners who arrived with her, who were almost all members of her party, were divided into two rooms, which they shared with a small group of women from the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of these were the wives, mothers, or daughters of men killed in the 1982 Hama Massacre. Unlike communist prisoners—who, in Hafez al Assad’s era, were to some

extent still “respected” political detainees—those from the Muslim Brotherhood were usually treated ruthlessly. Some of the women encountered by Samira and her comrades in Douma had, in fact, been to Tadmor as well, where they had been repeatedly and savagely tortured and raped.

Upon arriving to Douma prison, Samira and Wejdan found a microcosm of their life outside: a world made up of womanhood, comradeship, and mutual support. They immediately began contributing to this world significantly. Only by learning some of the details of their lives there can we understand the deep bond between Samira and her friends. In Douma, for example, the communist detainees decided to be consistent with their beliefs, and tried to establish a quasi-commune based on collaboration and sharing. Since none of them knew how long they were going to be there, they decided to make prison life as bearable as possible. Wejdan has explained how, as young detainees (they were almost all in their twenties) they managed, as much as possible, to “live decently and establish a relationship of love.” They placed their money in a common fund and, every six months, elected someone to supervise this small amount of money earned from wool work, hairdressing, and manufacturing wooden artifacts. They then distributed their earnings according to personal needs; applying Marx’s famous principle of “From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.” If, on the one hand, it was forbidden to be politically active with other prisoners or to carry out activities that might be construed as bearing a direct political message,This could result in the person being sent back to the Palestine Branch in Damascus to be interrogated; something everyone dreaded. on the other hand, the detainees were freer to discuss their beliefs and share their opinions in Douma

prison than they were outside jail, according to Wejdan. “I still regard those four years in prison as maybe the only time I felt freer than other Syrians outside,” she says. “I think all my comrades agree with me.”

In prison, Samira was one of the most active detainees, loved by everyone, according to those who knew her. She was kind to all, and a renowned optimist. Even in the worst situations, Wejdan says, “she will hang on to the only spot of light she sees.” She has the ability to conquer people’s hearts. True to her Homsi origins, she loves joking and even drawing caricatures. Several of Wejdan’s anecdotes attest to Samira’s playful attitude, such as the precious memory of their first encounter in the Palestine Branch in October 1978. When Samira entered the dormitory in which Wejdan had also been put, the latter was sleeping up against the ceiling of the cells, because it was so crowded there was no other place for her. When the officer opened the heavy iron door, Wejdan poked her head round to see the new arrival. As usual, Samira didn’t wait for the jailer to leave before she spoke. She looked at Wejdan and, seeing her head full of ruffled, not exactly clean, curls, greeted her with a cheerful, “Ya kharouf!” (“Hey, little lamb!”). Needless to say, they immediately became friends.

For Samira and her comrades, life in prison had no room for idleness or despair. The communist prisoners were well-organized and devoted themselves to a variety of activities, sometimes with the complicity of guards, who were mostly normal policemen. The days in prison seemed to go faster when they were engaged in theater; writing for the magazine (one of Samira’s favorite pastimes); or crocheting. This had even been true in the Palestine Branch: although conditions had been much worse, they

had always found ways to be active and creative. One episode recounted by Wejdan about the Palestine Branch remains vivid in my mind. In Branch 235, the communists lived with other women political detainees who were there for diverse reasons. There were Palestinians from Fatah; Lebanese women accused of relations with Israel; and Egyptians. Since trust was a rare commodity, women from the Action Party tried not to interact or talk too much. One day, however, Wejdan and Samira found a plastic bag left behind by a Lebanese woman who had left the branch. It contained a pair of pajamas and other personal belongings, but what really drew their attention was the design on the side of the bag: a chessboard. Wejdan and Samira saw this as a great chance to ease the stress of the interrogations and torture with a possible source of entertainment. They decided to make chess pieces out of bits of leftover bread, crafting small statues of queens, kings, soldiers, knights, and so on out of the stale dough. They put in a lot of effort and dedication, and were very satisfied with the final result. Yet before they could start their first game, a Lebanese woman came and told them someone had informed the director about their chessboard, and that they had to get rid of it immediately. Samira and Wejdan cried as they threw down the toilet all the precious chess pieces they had made over the course of so many sleepless nights.

One of the main problems for detainees was their relationships with their families. As mentioned, relatives were not usually informed of arrests. However, some families did receive word about their loved ones, often after many long and silent months. Some even managed to visit them. It was on these occasions—especially when people hailed from the same geographical area—that other detainees could arrange for their own families to learn

about their situation. Even so, it was very difficult to receive a visit. It was this very issue that prompted the detainees to organize a hunger strike. The Muslim Brotherhood women, in particular, faced additional restrictions on visits as part of the general policy of repressing them further—but they were told this measure was “the communists’ fault.” The hunger strike’s demands included not just visits but also more and better food, and improved conditions in general. Wejdan recalls how, in those days, guards would sometimes tempt them with delicious food, when the mere smell of cucumbers and cheese was enough to stimulate reveries. Food was, of course, another key issue in prison. Wejdan recalls how the party’s leaders once sent flowers to pay homage to the women detained in Douma. “Why didn’t they send ice cream?” asked Samira, disappointed.

Throughout all of this, the group’s bonds grew ever tighter. There were no social differences among the communist detainees, who constantly and conscientiously took care of each other. This care extended to the Muslim Brotherhood women too. Wejdan remembers a very important woman in their cell who was always served and revered by another inmate. Samira’s compassionate arm reached out to these downtrodden women who had gone through unimaginable things in Tadmor. One of them had given birth to a daughter inside Tadmor without medical care. The little girl came with her to Douma prison, staying in her cell until the age of 7 or 8. She was loved by all the women.

Samira and her comrades also managed to welcome new arrivals. One of these was a 16-year-old girl who arrived still wearing her school uniform. Since she was in the political detainees’ section, all the women started wondering what type of political activity she might have been involved in at

16. It turned out that her only “crime” had been to draw donkey ears on the Hafez al-Assad face on her school notebook (all of which carried the leader’s image) during a fit of boredom in class. Without saying a word, her geography teacher had immediately contacted the Palestine Branch, where she was taken and held for a month before being brought to Douma, where she spent a year.

Freedom

Samira and her closest comrades were set free on the same day; 26 November, 1991. From 1993 all the way up until Samira’s abduction, they celebrated this day together every year; eating and dancing, things Sammour loves deeply. So strong was the bond born of their prison years that Samira and her friends maintained and cherished the feeling of closeness and togetherness, even when life took them in different directions. They had been a family for four years; they would remain a family forever.

The details of Samira’s liberation, as narrated by Wejdan, are deeply touching and moving. I must confess I cried during Wejdan’s account, and felt a series of overwhelming emotions. The story of the day is also interesting in what it tells us about Assad’s Syria. To understand the events of that day, mention must first be made of another important date in the Syrian calendar: 16 November; a date Syrians know well, as it is a national holiday, commemorating the so-called “Corrective Movement” coup that brought Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970.

Under Hafez’s dictatorship, 16 November was a special day

for Syrian prisoners, awaited with a mixture of hope and horror. On that day, there was a chance of inmates being suddenly and arbitrarily pardoned; transferred to a better prison; moved to a worse prison; or even sentenced to death. Usually, their fate was determined by their willingness to collaborate with the regime. For this reason, many of them were called by officers and asked to collaborate in exchange for freedom. This happened to Samira and her comrades every year they were in prison, except the last one. Every year they were asked to collaborate and every year they would refuse.

When 16 November, 1991, came around, nobody called on them to offer the usual deal. This fact was not welcomed positively by the inmates. It was a strange change of routine that could only foreshadow bad news. The more days went by, the more the detainees grew nervous, interpreting the silence as a sign of an impending capital sentence. Suddenly, on the 26th, the detainees were all taken to Damascus, which seemed to confirm their suspicions. The uncertainty of the trip, worsened by the thought that they had left all their belongings in Douma, leaving prison with only the clothes on their backs, made everyone extremely nervous. As the bus crossed the Eastern Ghouta countryside, some of them began to panic.

When they arrived at the Palestine Branch, Samira and her friends were called into a room, one by one. Wejdan described the scene so vividly I could almost see it with my own eyes. I could see Wejdan, and I could see Samira in the same situation, because what they went through must have been very similar. When Wejdan’s turn came to be summoned, she found an officer seated at a high, faraway desk, reading something and paying no attention to her.

She stood there, silently waiting for him to talk to her. After a long time, the officer suddenly pointed to a piece of paper on another desk and asked:

“Is that your ID?”

Years had passed since Wejdan had last seen her ID. She wasn’t sure it was hers. Moreover, the table was far away, and she didn’t know if she had permission to move. The officer got impatient:

“Come on, is this yours or not?”

Wejdan went to the table, took the ID in her hand, and stared at it.

“Yes… I… I … think it’s mine.”

Her voice was trembling. The suspicion had crept inside of her that they might accuse her of something horrible and sentence her to death.

The officer casually pointed to a door at the side of the room. It was not the door from which she had entered.

“You may go, you are free.”

Shocked, Wejdan stood still, not moving an inch, paralyzed and overwhelmed by feelings of anger, rage, and frustration. If it was so easy to set her free, she thought, why had they stolen four years and two months of her youth? And why did they now want to part her from the only life she knew anymore; from that cohesive group of women she now considered her family?

Such was the turmoil inside her, she was unable to hold back her words, and she asked:

“If it’s so easy for you to tell me to leave, why did you keep me in prison for four years?”

Tears fell from her face as she spoke the words.

The officer looked at her, and said:

“There are a lot of people who did nothing special in that time. Go out now and compensate for those four years!”

Still, Wejdan could not move. The officer pressured her:

“If you don’t leave now, I’ll send you back to prison!”

She left through the door immediately, and found herself in a yard. She had been the second to be set free. All of a sudden, the fear of being separated from the group became unbearable. She and the woman who had been freed first decided they would wait for the last one of them to be out. They waited in the yard for hours. The guards started insulting them, but they waited and waited. Samira was one of the last to be freed. When the last one finally came out, they rejoiced uncontrollably: jumping, singing, dancing, and hugging each other. Together they sang the famous Fayrouz song, “O Freedom!”

For three years I have kept this image in my heart, re-living it in my mind like a movie innumerable times. In some perhaps naïve sense, I have drawn hope from it. I have translated this mental picture into the scenes of jubilation that might accompany the news of Samira finally coming home again, or of Syrians finally celebrating a free Syria

and the rebirth of their country. In thinking about Sammour and her companions, I have often wondered how such strength and resistance could even be possible. Yet, after years spent walking among free Syrians, I shouldn't be surprised at all: wherever they are, Syrians will drink the last sip of hope left in their glass and use it to build and rebuild, relentlessly.

That moment cemented Samira's friendship with her comrades forever. Yet, immediately after it, they had to part ways. Since they each came from different areas of the country (Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Suwayda, and Hama), they had to buy separate tickets for the buses. Once again, they shared the little money they had. Due to the stigma still accompanying Syrian women detainees to this day, it was not easy for most of them to go back home, though that is another story. As Yassin al-Haj Saleh has narrated, Samira settled in Homs for a few years, before heading to Damascus to live her life as a free and independent woman. This decision, so unusual for a Syrian woman at that time, met with a lot of resistance from her family.

The rest of the story is better-known, though certainly not known in full. There is, in fact, so much more to say about Sammour: Sammour the wife; Sammour the daughter; Sammour the aunt; Sammour the woman who loved eating ice-cream, dancing, cooking, comforting others, and surrounding herself and her family with beauty and grace. Sammour embodying some of the most precious qualities of the Syrian people: the capacity to stand back on one's feet after multiple blows; the ability to dance in the storm; and, finally, that inclination to overthrow authority through smiles and laughter; a habit which is in itself revolutionary. Most surprisingly, even in her prolonged absence, Samira

still smiles at us and gives us hope, as Yassin wrote so beautifully in his ~~eighth letter~~ to his wife:

> Your absence has nourished both hopes: the desperate hope that immunizes against despair, and the hopeful hope that creates everything new and creative, that is forever seeking change; the radical undying hope, and the revolutionary hope that injects newness, freedom, and meaning into life.

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