07-12-2016

I Once Had a Hometown Called Al-Midan

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Whenever I talk about my Damascene neighborhood, al-Midan, I struggle against myself and my own mind as not to forget its features. Any omission of these memories would mean my true estrangement, and this is what I attempt to escape. To me, al-Midan was not only the place I was born and lived in, but has always constituted an identity and

belonging, and left its lasting mark on my way of living and thinking.

The habits and traditions of al-Midan inhabitants were prevalent in my subconscious, as they were ingrained in myself through the collective consciousness. My deep-seated connection with this neighborhood was an inevitable result of the presence of my relatives – with whom I had shared my life there. My grandparents and three uncles lived with us in the neighborhood, and also my grandmother, my mother's mom, all of whom further entrenched our sense of belonging to this place.

A refusal to leave al-Midan, or to be separated from it, was embedded in the collective consciousness of most of its families. An almost tribal mindset took control of the intellectual formats of most of its people, patterns along the lines of "blood is thicker than water," "whoever shed off his skin gets cold," "the nail doesn't leave the skin." Even throughout my university years, I was inclined not to become alienated from my cousins who inhabited al-Midan, as most of my friends at the university were my neighborhood friends.

Furthermore, the Islamic character dominated the general atmosphere, which played a major role in solidarity among its local population. This will prove especially relevant in the wake of the peaceful protest movement. However, this ideological cohesion did not prevent coexistence with a district inhabited by Christians, dubbed "the Christians Quarter," as well as quarter for those hailing from the Alawite sect, dubbed "Al-Joura Quarter."

Despite the predominance of the religious component as a

catalyst for social cohesion for the people of al-Midan, the social customs of the neighborhood often had an even stronger influence than religion on local public opinion.

al-Midan neighborhood is considered today one of the largest neighborhoods of Damascus. Although some regard the neighborhood as not being part of the original Damascene neighborhoods for being situated outside the ancient walled center or within its seven gates, the people of al-Midan have always been keen to be a melting pot of integration within the fabric of Damascenes traditions and customs.

Whenever I attempt today to discuss al-Midan neighborhood, I find mine to be a goldfish memory, porous, and teeming with uncorrelated pictures of it; as for its details, they are scattered. I find myself describing two quarters, the first is where I was raised and brought up, and I will call this the First Quarter, and the second is where I moved with my family to live in the western part of al-Midan.

First Quarter, First Adoration

When I first began writing about the quarter in which I first lived, I attempted to endow it with an identity that is distinct from the rest of the streets and districts of al-Midan. My attempts failed. The quarter is by all means linked with all other Midani quarters, and its customs and traditions are integral to the customs and traditions of Midanis at large.

I grew up in a small and humble home, located on the third floor and situated at the center of the First Quarter, which stretches between the Al-Mujtahid and Corniche streets. My balcony is credited for keeping me within the walls of the

First Quarter, since it occupied a unique site in the quarter, and revealed to me the movements of its residents and their children, which enabled me to observe the children playing in the street. As night fell, my curiosity led me to overhear the talks of our quarter's youngsters, who used to gather near the building where I lived. At the time, I was but a teenager trying to discover the world of the opposite sex, within the boundaries of what is permitted by norms, and without anyone's notice, as to not smear the image of modesty set for me.

My balcony has done me another great favor, which is a unique flavor of the Eid. The square it overlooked used to turn into a festival, where the quarter is furnished and the swings are set. Midani families arrived in droves, with their children, for holiday leisure and entertainment. This associated al-Midan locals with this quarter, as it became their destination during the holiday season, and also a source of livelihood for the vendors who set up their kiosks on the streets and sold cotton candy, heitaliyya (milk pudding) and juices. Their calling voices mixed with the the voices of others who called on children to ride the swings, or to try the carnival games that they concocted to earn some money.

Mohammed, who was 17 years old at the time, stood at one corner and shouted loudly: "Come near… come near… your one pound can become five." It was a simple game, with a basic concept: there is a dish containing five pounds, and a child has to throw a one pound coin from afar into the dish; if the pound hits its mark, the child wins 5 pounds in its stead.

In addition to holiday cheer, my attachment to the First

Quarter was due to the nature of social relations prevailing at the time. There was great emphasis placed on neighborship and the sense of community. This meant that everyone was obliged to preserve the privacy of others, and to maintain neighborly courtesy. This was manifested through the behavior of the Quarter's people, as the general social atmosphere resembled a tale told by Scheherazade. An inherited, non-verbal social contract, woven from the yarns of customs and tradition, brought together the people of the neighborhood. Most families are keen to maintain that contract through imparting upon their children these customs and habits.

The neighborhood was also distinguished by its social cohesion, as all Midani families knew each other, and referred to each other as the family of "so and so" and the sons of the "such and such" family. Furthermore, women had their status within the neighborhood, and they were called in relation to their fathers as the "daughter of so and so." No one dared to accost or harass them, which created for these women a sense of social security.

On one occasion, a strange youngster tried to obstruct my way, and once I turned to see who dared to stop me, I heard a voice from afar: "Hey you… are you harassing a girl from my quarter?!"

That day I stood witnessed to Samer's chivalry, Samer being a local from my Quarter; it materialized clearly as he tried to protect me from the strange young man, even without me asking him to do so. I was able to protect myself without anyone resorting to any measure.

I denounced his behavior at the time: was he really trying

to protect me or was he trying to exhibit his masculinity in front of the people of the neighborhood? I had no choice but to remain silent and leave the place; it was disgraceful for a girl to raise her voice, or to transgress the boundaries of acceptability set for her on the street.

“Common decency…” this word constituted a shackle wrapped around my neck, and governed my actions and my relationship with the neighbors. It was always deemed necessary to place any action within the framework of common decency of al-Midan neighborhood. This mitigated the manner in which I dress or walk, and even how to to deal with friends later on.

When I was in middle school, I left the First Quarter with my family and moved to the western district of the neighborhood. But I remained confined to the boundaries of common decency. Even if I changed the “walls” –as my father used to say– I had still not departed from al-Midan neighborhood, nor fled the mindset of its local community, which still accompanies me here today as a lifestyle that I still adhere to as not to be alienated from the Midani identity that I grew up with.

‘To Each Their Own’ Quarter

The new quarter, which is located in the western part of al-Midan, and which is only a 10 minutes walk from the First Quarter, consisted of two high buildings, each thirteen stories high, separated by a small garden, and faced by scattered slum dwellings and residential buildings.

Moving with my parents to our new home, which was located on the eleventh floor, changed my perception of the balcony. This new higher balcony led me to not be content

with merely observing the people, as it revealed the features of al-Midan neighborhood, including a part of Corniche and al-Mujtahid Street. It also lifted the veil off the face of Damascus and the roofs of its buildings, especially Mount Qasioun, leaning against its cliffs are the houses of al-Muhajireen neighborhood.

What was interesting to note about the new quarter was the radical change in the social atmosphere within which I was raised; neighborship and social relations in this quarter tended to be more classical, dispassionate and monotonous. The quarter remains quiet throughout the year, vacant of the sounds of children playing in the alleyways, even in Eid days; it was also vacant of the voices of any young people loitering on the pavement all day.

In the new quarter, everyone lived together to the principle of “I am in my own space and you are in yours.” Instead of leaving doors wide open, as our former first floor neighbor used to do, neighbors shut their doors tightly. Instead of the frequent visits that were a common occurrence in my relationship with our second floor neighbor, who used to visit us accompanied by her two daughters, my relationship with the neighbors became limited to exchanging smiles and sometimes greetings if we met in the elevator. All of these observations pushed me to name this new place To Each His Own Quarter.

“Etiquette” dominated social relations in the new quarter, instead of the communitarian sense that prevailed in the First Quarter. Socioeconomic factors had probably played a role in this, since most of the inhabitants of the western district belonged to the upper middle class, whereas most of the inhabitants of the First Quarter were middle-class,

and others belonged to the poorer classes.

These classical attitudes in To Each His Own Quarter pushed me to maintain strong relationships with the friends I had in the First Quarter, and to move together to study in secondary school in al-Midan neighborhood – and then attend university together.

When I describe al-Midan neighborhood, I must talk about my grandmother who lived near the Corniche, between the First Quarter and To Each His Own Quarter. This old woman was partly responsible for my upbringing in accordance with Midani tradition; and perhaps she gave me the sense of belonging I had to the neighborhood, because she is a full-blooded Midani woman. She was religious, and had her stature within the family.

Her passion was confined to the small balcony which she deemed her window to the world, given her age and her inability to leave the house and walk far. Her porch was approximately two meters wide, in which she placed a pot of house plants with several sprouts and shrubs: jasmine, sambac, bitter orange, lemon and hibiscus. In the hours between sunset and night, she used to water them after performing the maghrib prayer. She also had a habit, each time I visited her, to put her palm on my head and recite for me verses from the Quran in order to protect and bless me. She would then sit down, with a rosary in her hand, praising God and overlooking the people of the neighborhood.

My grandmother passed away later. When the Syrian revolution broke out, most of my family, relatives and friends left, as a result of persecution by the Syrian regime. What strikes me today is the oddity of coincidence – “Life is

full of the ironies," they say. At a time when I struggle to recover images and notions of al-Midan and its quarters that were once engraved in my memory, in order to document these details through this article, my father prepares to catch up with those who left the neighborhood, and to move to a new place away from al-Midan!

The Wheat Silos: Where It All Began

My senses had the ability to be interwoven into the alleys of al-Midan, and to mix with the scent of religious and social events within its alleyways. Religious rituals had especially contributed to the formation of the neighborhood's culture, and nurtured my memory to be more of a long religious calendar, specifically during the month of Ramadan, when I head to al-Hassan Mosque located in the Corniche Street to perform the tarawih prayers every night.

Al-Hassan Mosque was designed in a spectacular architectural manner. The basement was allocated to women; it was a large hall furnished with burgundy carpets, in the middle of which is a mihrab assigned for the imam. Along the walls of the hall stood several shelves holding Qurans, and books of prayer and hadith.

As for the days prior to each of the two Eids, al-Fitr and al-Adha, they also had their rituals in al-Midan. My family, who usually would not allow me to stay out later than eight o'clock, permitted that on in this day. I seized the opportunity, and headed to Jazmatiyya and Abu Habl streets, as if it is a social tradition that my friend and I are keen on maintaining. We would behold the holiday decorations, candy stalls extending along the outskirts of the main market, and religious songs coming from inside

the shops as if it were a choir especially assembled for the occasion. As for the workers and vendors, some of them were used to wearing the traditional Damascene dress, and to holstering a dagger to their waist in celebration of Eid, in a showcase of the history of Damascus and this neighborhood.

Furthermore, my mind teems with the traditions of al-Midan dwellers which are associated with food. This is also considered a part of the culture of the Midanis and of the Damascenes in general, especially on Fridays, where hummus, fatté h (chickpeas with spiced yogurt) or fūl (cooked beans with vegetables) must occupy the center of the table.

My passion was embodied in my accompanying my father, often following his conclusion of Friday prayers, to Jazmatiyya, Abu Habl or Bab al-Jabiyah market to buy fūl and hummus. I sat in the car and observe passersby as they shop; the scents of vegetables and meat invaded my senses, and my ears are deafened by sounds of vendors calling on people to come check their goods.

Al-Midan is famous for its authentic Damascene cuisines, particularly those in Jazmatiyya and Abu Habl streets, as well as for selling shawarma and falafel, producing sweets, especially during times of festivity, concoctions such as ma’moul (shortbread pastries) in its many different flavors.

My grandmother once told me that a majority of Midanis hail from Hauran; our ancestors had settled in this neighborhood which was during the Umayyad era an arena (mīdān) for horses. Farmers from the southern region and Hauran plains made their living selling grains, and they had

many grain silos in al-Midan area. Many researchers confirm that the name comes from it being the main economic and purveying center for Damascenes outside the walls of the ancient city. Even today, the archway of the wheat bawaykeh (silos) are still there, standing tall in the old quarters of the neighborhood, bearing witness to the remnants of this trade through huge warehouses that have in this age become archaeological sites. The Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities registered these archways as archeological heritage sites that ought not be demolished.

In Le faubourg du Mīdān à Damas, which was completed after a thorough study of the records of sharia courts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, French historian Brigitte Marino states that a miniscule percentage of Midani households had cooking chambers in the early 1700s. She attributed this to the rural background of a large segment of the population at the time. Those had migrated from the plains of Hauran towards the outskirts of Damascus. She notes the high proportion of the such chambers in the early 1800s, which indicates the emerging civil modes of living and cultural phenomena within the neighborhood, and the profound shifts in terms of the city's political economy. A new commercial and religious elites had emerged from al-Midan, and these began competing with the traditional Damascene elites for their administrative and religious positions that were concentrated within the spaces of the old city.

This growth had its impact on some Midani families, where a class of neo-bourgeois –so to speak– began to emerge up until this time. This class seized control of economic life in the neighborhood, and enjoyed good relations with the

ruling power. A number of Midani traders ran for parliamentary elections, and many others managed to expand their businesses beyond the neighborhood's boundaries, stretching over the entirety of the country. This did not prevent the rest of the neighborhood's inhabitants,however, from taking part in the uprising against the Syrian regime at a later stage.

Al-Midan neighborhood is characterized by class diversity, but most of its families were middle class – including my own. Unlike many Midani families who embraced certain businesses, traditionally trade or artisanship, my father insisted that my brothers and I receive an education. "I have no shop to bequeath to you," he used to tell us, "so I will have to bequeath knowledge."

Midan Rises Up

When the Syrian revolution first erupted, al-Midan neighborhood was among the first Damascene neighborhoods to participate in the protest movement. I still recall the first time I heard a massive chant reverberating throughout al-Midan districts: "The people want to overthrow the regime!" After further observation and attunement, I realized that a demonstration had emerged from the alleys of my neighborhood!

It' was Good Friday, April 22nd, 2011, a day worth a thousand days. The number of demonstrators was substantial, and their voice was thunderous. Throats hailing under the dome of al-Hassan Mosque in the heart of al-Midan, demanding freedom and the downfall of the Syrian regime. The aged ruby of Damascus chanted with Midani throats: "Revolution… Revolution," moving the embryos of

freedom within me.

[video:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNJdQE9lZdg&ab_channel=3ayeef autoplay:0]

Thanks to the impact this demonstration had on public revolutionary consciousness, al-Midan neighborhood, and especially al-Hassan Mosque, managed to attract more protesters. Over the course of two consecutive Fridays, demonstrators flooded in from far and wide, marching the streets after the end of the prayer.

Since the spark of the revolution in Syria, al-Midan did not isolate itself from the developments that ensued; al-Hassan Mosque was not the only mosque in the area to revolt against the Syrian regime, as demonstrations took place in several other mosques: al-Daqqaq, Zain al-Abideen, Khayro Yassin, and Abulwafa. These mosques became sanctuaries for peaceful demonstrators. In contrast, the security and the shabiha (death squads) used to prepare as of Thursday night, stationed behind Al-Hassan Mosque, at al-Midan police station, and under the southern Bridge, to prevent protesters from emerging. They erected checkpoints at several junctures, carried out arrest raids, and sought to tighten their grip over this rebellious neighborhood.

Even then, demonstrations used to proceed every Friday following the conclusion of prayers. I used to find myself rushing to my balcony, awaiting their exit from the mosques, and then hearing their voices and beholding the crowds marching through the alleyways. The security used to cut off roads leading to the mosques, in order to prevent demonstrators from gathering in one place.

Demonstrations in al-Midan followed in close succession,

like beads of a necklace, one after the other. Protesters no longer had the patience for Friday to arrive, and instead started coming out, every single day, from sporadic squares and areas, notably Haqla Square that was renamed Freedom Square, Sakhaneh Square, in addition to the Corniche Street and Jazmatiyya, the MTN Telecom center, and Nahr Aysheh, and Al Qaa'a. Demonstrations emanated from the heart of al-Midan alleys, prepared with caution and discretion, and circulated later on via social networking sites.

For a year and a half, the neighborhood sacrificed many of its young lives. It was Moataz Billah Sha'ar who became the first Midani martyr, on April 23rd, 2011. His funeral started from al-Daqqaq Mosque. That day, I was amazed by the size of the mourning crowd, which had assembled from people from all Midani districts, coming to express their outrage, chanting revolutionary slogans, their words provoking security bullets – particularly the chant "He who kills his own people is a traitor."

Then followed the cascade of martyrs in succession: Amer Bazaza, Khaled Fakhani, Mohammed Ayham Samman, Ammar al-Nouri, Mohammad Ilyas al-Saqqal, Mahmoud Mardini. Some funerals-turned-protests for these martyrs were suffocating and breath silencing, where sorrow over death mixed with tear gas and the sounds of live ammunition; others had swathes of demonstrators, chanting for the martyr, demanding freedom and the downfall of the regime. Protesters were united, and rallied around the slogans "With soul, with blood, we will redeem you, our martyrs!" and "The people want to overthrow the regime," particularly in the funeral of the child Hala al-Monajjid, which was one of the largest funeral

demonstrations al-Midan neighborhood has ever witnessed.

There was not a single quarter in al-Midan that failed to participate in the peaceful revolutionary movement in all its forms, from demonstrations, distribution of leaflets, to the closure of roads by lighting tires on fire – preventing the arrival of security cars and shabiha, especially at Corniche Street; not to mention the voices of takbir (chants of “God is Great”) that were cried every night from behind the windows and balconies. As the clock struck midnight, sounds of takbir had risen in the sky from several districts of al-Midan, only to be soon followed by the sounds of bullets and shabiha.

The day July, 15th, 2012 was a date that resembles no other, a day of new dynamics that will forever change the neighborhood’s landmarks. Our world was turned upside down due to clashes between the two armies, the Syrian Arab Army and the Free Syrian Army. In a battle known as the “Battle of Damascus,” the FSA entered al-Midan, taking positions in districts near Sakhaneh and Haqla squares – and parts of Nahr Aysheh.

During the period of clashes, which lasted for nearly four days, the SAA stormed al-Midan with tanks and armored vehicles, and stationed under the Southern Ring Road near the police station. It also bombed parts of the neighborhood with mortars and artillery, including Sakhaneh Square, Haqla, and Nahr Aysheh.

My towering balcony enabled me to see the shells falling on people’s heads. The ascending smoke columns guided me to determine exactly which streets had been bombarded. My eyes scanned the neighborhood, worried about the state

of our neighbors and our families. Did they die, and turn into mere numbers to be added to the long list of martyrs? Were they displaced, as many other Midani families were, fleeing the grip of death?

The clashes ended with the withdrawal of the FSA from al-Midan neighborhood, as a result of incessant shelling, and the lack of fighters and ammunition. The scene resulted in great devastation, particularly in Haqla and Sakhaneh squares, as well as parts of Nahr Aysheh – especially the quarters near Ali bin Abi Talib Mosque.

The Syrian regime later tightened its grip on the people of al-Midan. It resorted to the dismemberment of the neighborhood by planting more roadblocks and checkpoints in its midst. Additionally, it established National Defense Force centers, and escalated detention campaigns against al-Midan inhabitants, leading to a gradual decline in the pace of demonstrations, which receded until it ceased entirely at the beginning of 2013.

Today, I reside in the Turkish city of Gaziantep. I recall the years which I have spent in al-Midan. I remember the Bawaykeh Archway, which will remain standing, and telling the tales of this neighborhood. I muster all my strengths, and imagine that my soul is still stuck inside the alleys of al-Midan, wandering around the first and second quarter, its old alleyways and popular markets, from the Nahr Aysheh market all the way to Abu Habl.