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To Samira al-Khalil: A Plant Blooms in the Dead of Winter

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[Editor's note: This article was published in Arabic as part of "About Samira and for her", a dossier of texts about Samira al-Khalil and letters addressed to her by friends, published on the 9th of December, 2021, eight years after the kidnapping of the Doma 4 activists: Razan Zaitouneh, Samira al-Khalil, Wael Hamada and Nazem Hammadi by Jaish Al-Islam.]

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I have hesitated to write about Samira al-Khalil, or to write to her.

Samira's story is a shared open wound for Syrians, a symbol of our crushed revolution. For me, it is also a source of deep personal pain and grief. I carry memories of 15 years of intermittent encounters with Samira. Encounters that took place during critical formative moments for me, moments that came to define the paths I would follow, or the paths that were imposed on me.

To summarize the story, I have selected three encounters, far apart in time and circumstance.

The Bud

In the early 2000s, I found myself driven by leftist zeal to delve into issues of freedom and social justice in Syria. I was spurred on by the brief moment of hope that we dubbed the "Damascus Spring," before it was aborted by the regime of Bashar al-Assad. My impulse was free of the ideological baggage I encountered at meetings full of men with sullen faces, meetings that left me reluctant to join any of the political organizations of the time.

Reading became the most effective way of learning about the Syrian opposition, and it led me to the writings of Yassin al-Haj Saleh. Who was this Yassin who wrote with such clarity, such boldness from the heart of Syria? Fascinated by such courage, I was intent on meeting him. Mutual friends told me about Yassin and Samira's story, about the loving couple who were political prisoners. Accused of belonging to leftist organizations, Samira has spent four years in prison, while Yassin was condemned to sixteen. Thanks to our friends' mediation, it was agreed that I would

meet Yassin and Samira in their home in the suburb of Qudssaya. It was spring 2003.

Nervous about the meeting, I did not want to show up empty-handed. I bought a Monstera plant in a small pot. It was a strange and unexpected decision for me. I had zero knowledge of or interest in plants at the time.



I spent the entire day before our meeting reminding myself not to ask any questions about their time in prison. I failed miserably. Yet my excitement and defiance were only partly to blame. The warmth that Samira and Yassin enveloped me in made me feel not like the boy I still was, but instead like an old friend reuniting with them after a long separation. Samira's hospitality was matched only by her gentle nature and by a shy smile whose kindness overwhelmed you.

I left that small house that day with big ideas. Later, I would learn from Yassin how much of a good impression the little plant had made on Samira and how it would forever remind her of me. Whenever I remember this, I am filled with indescribable joy.

Like a Guardian Angel

On June 13, 2011, near the al-Hassan Mosque in the al-Midan neighborhood of Damascus, security forces violently dispersed the "demonstration of the intellectuals" as that protest came to be called — a name I have never liked.

We scattered along side streets. As I caught my breath,

trying to discern which friends had been arrested and which had gotten away, Samira appeared with two of our friends. She was smiling and calm, like a guardian angel. That's when I realized she too had been at the protest and was now trying to check up on everyone. We talked briefly and she walked away, only after I assured her that I would leave the neighborhood immediately. That was my last meeting with Samira.

A Lullaby

It was an evening in mid-August in 2013 at Yassin's family home in Raqqa, where he was living in hiding. I used to visit him there after the many hours spent at the theater workshop I was running in the city with a group of young men and women. Some of these young people would later be killed by the regime's air raids. Others would be kidnapped by ISIS forces, their fate still unknown. Those who survived are now dispersed in the diaspora.

I was sitting at one end of the living room, which was made up of two rooms that opened onto each other. At the other end, Yassin was wrapping up a Skype call with Samira, who was in the besieged Eastern Ghouta. I was exhausted. It had been a scorching hot day and I had just devoured a large serving of Deiri Kabab to top things off. As I sipped some tea waiting for Yassin, I shut my eyes. I could hear Yassin and "Sammur", as he liked to call her, say goodbye while she laughed. I really wished that call would never end. It was hard to stay awake on that comfortable sofa, and Yassin's voice and Sammur's laughter sung like a faraway lullaby.

That was the last time I heard Samira's voice. I left Raqqa

two days later not knowing it would be the last time I would set foot in Syria. I long deeply for that evening, for that lullaby.

Samira

Samira's story — before, during, and after the revolution — epitomizes the story of Syria. Her partner Yassin has said so himself often, in his writings to Between July 2017 and December 2019, Yassin al-Haj Saleh addressed 15 letters to his wife Samira al-Khalil describing what happened since she was kidnapped. [The letters are available here in English](#). (ed.) and about Samira, such as in "Samira and Syria", a chapter in *Samira al-Khalil: Diaries of the 2013 Douma Siege*. The diaries were collected by Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Samira's husband; they include daily experiences noted by Samira in papers and on her social media account during the siege of Doma, in addition to texts about Samira and her kidnapping. The book was published in Arabic and [translated to Spanish](#) (By Naomí Ramírez Díaz) and [Italian](#) (By Giovanna de Luca and Sami Haddad), and will be published soon in French and English. (ed.)

Because we are denied the truth of what happened to Samira and to her friends after they were kidnapped, because we are denied justice anywhere in Syria, waves of doubt and despair sweep over us every day. Bitterness threatens to become our daily bread. Yet we remember the story of Samira and her companions. We remember the stories of other disappeared Syrians, of those who died in prisons or under rubble. We remember all the generosity, courage, and nobility in these stories. And we know that we are only defeated if we become bitter victims.

We are still able to remember and to narrate. We are still able to think and to resort even to the imagination, to imagine conditions that preserve the dignity of those of us still living and those of us who were disappeared and departed.

It is what Samira was always able to do. In one of her posts from the heart of besieged Douma, she writes: "I wonder if the jet fighter could fly higher into a magnetic force in the clouds that would swallow it before it can swallow the life of those below." Despite her resolve to document the horrors of the siege and massacres of Ghouta, Samira refused to give in to bitter, resentful language. She insisted on optimism, she inoculated with sarcasm and wit, giving free reign to the kind of thought and imagination capable of defying the toughest siege.

About two years ago, I developed an uncharacteristic habit of caring very carefully for houseplants. This transformation was a mystery to me. A dear friend joked that it was a symptom of a single man turning forty. She may well be right! But she didn't have the full story. I didn't tell her that, following months of cohabitation, I give each plant a name...nor that sometimes, when I water the plants, I speak to them, following the advice I read on some specialized website. When the long, gloomy winter arrives in Berlin, so does my anxiety over the plants' wellbeing. One of them is similar to the Monstera I gifted Samira and Yassin nearly twenty years ago. Of its sisters, this is the plant that seems to me to have a fighting chance at surviving the long winter darkness. It is not a coincidence that I named her Samira.