

Now, This is not Damascus Anymore

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[Damascus at Night. Image from Unknown Archive]

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This is Damascus. The phrase that we were used to hearing as children on the radio. All Syrians recognize the tone of this phrase: of course, this is Damascus. After Damascus was transformed from a city to a capital, and Syrians migrated from their small towns, villages and campsites, it became an in-between space, somewhat like the daily chores of a woman who prepares dinner for her husband without thinking of making love to him.

But this is no longer Damascus anymore. Even though it is raining gently, "Damascus" has spread out over the entire Syrian map all at once!

Today is Friday, and the drizzle will not occur again. It has stopped just long enough for people to go out on the streets and congregate in plazas and mosques. Who now remembers Şadiq al-Nayhum and the mosque as *jami*? [1] Who knows now that every demonstrator is a project for death?

Death is a game whose features are not clear. This diary entry has made out of death an artistic canvas. An obscure and insignificant portrait, but it appears in front of me through the chests of the defenseless youth who go out to die. How will the mothers' cradling forgive the murderers? How will the Quixotians practice justice among these masses, when exercises of justice only bring a little justice and a lot of injustice. But heroism is not glory that resembles laurel wreaths;

this is a Greek myth. Heroism is to be on the side of the weak so that they may become strong, or for me to reshape the roundness of the earth with my fragile fingers and a few flimsy words. Should I do what Rimbaud, in his seasons of the inferno, wrote: "I sent the wreaths of the martyrs, the lights of the arts and pride of the artists to the devil and turned towards the eternal wisdom?"

The drizzle stopped. A miserly sun glowed brightly and then resumed gliding over my cheek. This was a moment of life; I took in the drops of drizzle before boarding a taxi and heading in the direction of Duma, one of the "suburbs of Damascus". I thought about how this diary resembled a deliverance or a shriek, but in the end it was just words. In this way I prepare myself to take the world by storm; those around me assume I am courageous, but actually they are mistaken, as from the moment that the car headed towards the place where the demonstration is happening, my knees gave way under me and my throat went dry. I heard the usual beats – fear is a human condition that has not been acknowledged by people; it is an elucidation on the meaning of love. Being afraid means that you are still human in the midst of this carnage.

We were approaching Harasta – the suburb that we needed to go through to get to Duma. The driver was a calm young man in his mid-twenties. I would discover later that he is brave. He told me that the road is blocked here. I snapped out of my daydreaming and spotted a long line of cars. The silence was overwhelming! For the first time I saw people so calm in a traffic jam like this. I got out of the car and went forward a few meters to see what was happening. There were several state-owned buses for domestic transport, green with yellow seats. The buses were stopped, blocking the movement of traffic. Inside them there were young men crammed on top of each other, sitting and standing. They were getting off the buses and dispersing on both sides of the street. Huge crowds of them were coming out, all of them silent. The young men pouring out from the buses' bellies were being led along and moved by a few men who were wearing grey and navy-blue uniforms. The young men's faces looked rough but weary. Most of them had shaved heads, and their poverty was evident. I approached one of the men rounding them up and asked him: "What is going on?" He frowned and ignored my question. There were no women in the street, except for one woman that I saw wearing a black *niqab*, dragging along a child and running in terror. People were frightened. A man in a car stuck his head out and said, "Go back, *ikhiti* [sister], these are *amn* [security men]."

"And the young men coming out of the buses, what will they do to them?"

He went silent and did not respond, but I could guess.

There were hundreds of them, possibly more. We stopped for half an hour until they all had disembarked and scattered on both sides, forming a small army.

One could see the terror on people's faces and I saw how they were retreating from the sidewalks and disappearing. There was a military checkpoint standing at the entrance to Duma. There were many agents from the security services searching trucks and checking identification, dozens of cars turning back and dozens of young men standing to a side with groups of security men interrogating them. I did not know at the time that Duma was under siege and Damascus and its

suburbs were surrounded by the security forces. Behind the agents from the security forces there stood on both sides many men in full military gear with helmets.

They stopped the car. One of the agents asked me: "Where're you going?"

I answered that I had come for a visit here. He looked at me sternly and asked me to get out of the car. I got out of the car and he stared with curiosity. He was short, and maybe it vexed him that I was taller than him, so he retreated a little and asked for my identity card. After scanning it, he said: "Ma'am, there're hoodlums in the area, please don't go in."

"I am visiting a seamstress for ten minutes," I said. Luckily, I did know a seamstress here. I told him her name and said to him: "I can call her if you want?"

He opened the car door and asked the driver to go on. I took a breath. Five-star treatment. Naively, I added: "What's going on?"

"Nothing at all, nothing," he said.

"Why all these soldiers and security?" I asked.

"Nothing, I swear to God, it's nothing," he added. I was reassured that I had played well the role that I always love to play – acting as if I do not know anything, so as to find out everything, being silent in front of those who love to talk, and the most important thing after that: observing attentively.

The car took off, and I had barely looked in front of me when I saw another military and security checkpoint! What is this? A checkpoint between checkpoints? "We have to go through the side streets," I told the driver.

"Let's go back, I swear to God I'm worried about you," he said. The second checkpoint was big. Military men were lined up shoulder-to-shoulder, forming a roadblock, and there was another barrier of security agents in front of them. I felt as if I were in a film on the occupation of a Palestinian village! What was this visual terrorism? Actually, it was not just visual, because my knees had begun to shake and were burning me.

When the officer opened the car door, and said, "Get out" in a stern voice, my knees snapped. I stood back up. He eyed me with curiosity and took my identity card. He was wearing civilian clothes and there was a man next to him. I knew from his accent that he was from the Jazira region.^[ii] As for the man checking my identification, he was from the Coast. What was going on! The security services and the army are either from the Jazira or the Coast! Maybe it was a coincidence today, as I knew many security agents that were just like me and all other Syrians, but I noticed that what they shared in common was that they were all minorities. The man from the Jazira region looked at me and asked: "Are you a TV presenter?"

"No" I said. He looked closely at me. Suddenly he extended his hand and pulled off my sunglasses, grabbing me powerfully by the hand. "What're you doing here?" he asked.

The second man said: "TV presenter! Yeah, I know your name, I've seen you on TV."

"You're mistaken," I said to him in desperation, "I have an appointment with the seamstress." I summoned some courage and raised my voice: "Sir, you're frightening people, what is the matter, what's going on?"

"You used to anchor the program 'Ladies First'," said the agent from the Coast, "I recognize you, my wife used to watch the program!" He bounded from his spot and shouted to the other agent: "Sir, she is from Orient TV!"^[iii] Within seconds all hell broke loose. I was surrounded by dozens of armed men, civilians as well, and became like a point in the middle of a circle!

I could no longer see anything and was suffocated by the odors. "Sir, I am a writer," I said, "Two years ago, I did actually anchor a program on Orient for three months, and before that, I used to anchor a cultural program on Syrian state TV. Please let me go on my way."

"Sir, maybe she wants to do something for those bastards from Orient!" said one of them. He came closer to me and grabbed me by the shoulder.

"Sir, I have nothing to do with any channel," I said to him, "and if you, Sir, recognize me, then you should be respectful and let me go. You're a security agent, and your duty is to protect me, not frighten me. And at least let me know what's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing's the matter," they all chimed unanimously.

"Then why are there all these soldiers and *amn*?" I asked.

"Nothing...it's nothing," they said.

"Ok, then let me get out of here at least!" I said to the one that seemed to be the most senior among them. He was silent for a little bit, and nodded his head; I was about to suffocate from the men surrounding me and my hand had gone inside my handbag, to the knife. The same knife that I carry wherever I move around in this city. The minutes were long, until he finally yelled at me, "Get the hell out of here." They dispersed from around me. Before I got back in the car, he said to me in a Bedouin dialect, "I swear to God, if you come back here, I'll make drums out of your skin!"

I closed my eyes, shutting them firmly so that he would not see my tears and imagined how human skin could become a drum to be beaten for hips to gyrate to. We passed the second checkpoint. Who were all these soldiers and security agents? Where were the townspeople? Was it a ghost town? I tried to call my friend to tell her that I was in Duma. No network. So the town was besieged from the outside and from inside. There were two more military checkpoints; the details were not very different. After the second checkpoint, I saw the same huge government buses, with young men coming out of them, but in greater numbers.

Were they the same young men that I had seen in Harasta? I guessed that today all the security agencies must have joined forces, because the effort was evident and the deployment intense,

which indicated that they were from several branches. I felt a sense of sorrow for those starving people that were crammed into the buses, where a small monster was hiding inside every one of them. I promised the officer at the fourth checkpoint that I would leave Duma, but at the end of the wide street, where the town ended, I asked the driver to take a turn off the road and we entered the side streets. A ten-year old child riding a bicycle helped us and asked me to follow him. He guided me to the town's main square near the large mosque. We circled around the farmlands. There were olive trees there. Olive trees cause me pain. A few days ago, I heard a Palestinian from Lidd on television telling how the Israelis forced him to demolish his own home. He was crying: "They say, who's your friend?" he said. Then, he sat under an olive tree in front of his demolished home and said, "The olive tree is my friend."

[i] Sadiq al-Nayhum, a Libyan scholar of Islam who distinguished between the *masjid* as a place purely for prayer and the *jami'* as a place for political debate and decision-making. See his books *Islam didd al-Islam 9Islam Against Islam* and *al-Islam fi-l- 'Asr (Islam Imprisoned)* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis).

[ii] "the peninsula", the name given to the northeast region of Syria near the Euphrates River, one of Syria's most agriculturally fertile areas. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria>

[iii] a Syrian opposition channel broadcasting from the UAE. www.orient-tv.net