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## Youssef Abdelki's Homecoming

**Mohammad Ali Atassi**

Right

...Damascus

Youssef Abdelki, the Syrian painter, has completed his journey. He has returned to his homeland, Syria, and to his city, Damascus, after a quarter century in Parisian exile. Without compromise or flattery and without state security agencies obstructing his arrival.

It was an emotional scene in which about 100 friends gathered at the Damascus airport to welcome Youssef, his wife, filmmaker Hala Abdallah, and their daughter Layla.

Everyone was there: poets, novelists, filmmakers, intellectuals, politicians and former prisoners who had spent more than 15 years in Syrian prisons.

Some had not seen Abdelki for 20 plus years and thus began to wonder: Could this be him? No, that's not him! They remained in this mindset each time a man entered the terminal gate bearing features similar to those of the Syrian painter, until finally Abdelki himself arrived in the reception room. The group began to applaud, a standing ovation that lasted many moments. Men, women, young, old – all embraced him with flowers, tears and songs...yes, even songs.

During the short period between the landing of the plane and Abdelki's entrance, what was evident on the faces of those present was the decades of repression, prison, forced exile and the memories of the martyrs who had died under torture. Also present was hope, hope that this tragedy would not be repeated and that his entry would be unhindered by any security agency, especially because he had reached this courageous decision to return without agreeing to conditions of loyalty or submission.

Long years of fear, repression and anticipation were erased by these voices, previously silenced, that had begun to rise, intoning a song by Fairuz (a song that echoes euphoria, triumph and hope) and encircling this prodigal son who had arrived in the airport terminal...

Abdelki's courage encouraged all to break the wall of silence, and they joined him with humble voice and began singing the Syrian national anthem, in hopes that their singing would reclaim the glory of the word "anthem." The true purpose of the nation, as he has oft repeated, had been destroyed by the Arab regimes and defamed by their rigid and victorious discourse at a time when nations were transformed into Gulags, filled with repression, subjugation and death.

In Youssef and Hala's modest Parisian home of exile we had found the true meaning of nationhood in the fresh, pure and generous friendship seated round the dining table, a table adorned with thyme and domestic olives. There, for a quarter century, the scent of brotherhood and loyalty, love and freedom produced another form of our nation, which Youssef liked to call *al balad*, place, country, because this term, as he once explained to a reporter of Al Jazeera television, has a relationship with the streets, the people, the homes, the plants and the land. It is a word that remains unquestionable, uncommon and genuine. It is the opposite of "nation."

Youssef's decision to return was clear and decisive and his mind had been made up for the past several years, yet he hesitated to make the journey alone, or to leave behind his many friends who shared this same condition, the condition of exile, and he was concerned that some would interpret his decision as reconciliation with the government.

His decision was not based on assurances received or because the situation within Syria had ameliorated (we all hope that his return reflects a true improvement of the situation); rather it was made because the date of his art exhibition, to be held in the Damascene Khan Asad Pasha, was fast approaching, scheduled for the beginning of the coming month. This date, like the one for his return, had been set one year previously. Bearing this in mind, Abdelki reaffirmed his political and intellectual position, the same position for which he had been imprisoned for two years in the late 1970s and which had deprived him of his country for 25 years.

Today, Abdelki returns to Damascus from his exile to stroll once again through these old alleys that he visited each morning in his dreams and obsessions. He returns to make his home in a new Damascene house within the old city, a house chosen and bought after perusing dozens of pictures and video tapes brought to him by his wife Hala during his exile. He returns to Damascus to drink from the steaming mugs of coffee served once more in the homes of the friends he had oft-visited in days gone by, and to find Aunt Um Youssef awaiting him, as she had done so long ago, ready to serve and share lunch. He returns to Damascus to visit the gravesite of his brother Fawaz, who had passed away several years previously and whose funeral he had been unable to attend. He returns to visit also the grave of his old friend, novelist Jamil Hatmal, who had died in Paris, helpless and yearning for his home of Damascus, repatriated only after having been entombed in his coffin.

Youssef Abdelki returns to Damascus bearing his paintings, these works of art which in the past had borne his feelings and spirit afar while their owner remained prisoner from a distance. And now, the canvases return to rest here, the artist finally having brought them home.

Abdelki returns to Damascus leaving behind thousands of Syrian exiles, some of whom have spent more than 35 years deprived of their country, home, parents and friends. Abdelki returns to remind us of this collective tragedy, which ought no longer be tolerated. The mothers and the fathers are dying broken hearted, unable to see

their children. The exiled children have entered the autumn of their lives, time has slipped away; for some of them it has ceased, and they return to their homeland in coffins.

Youssef Abdelki returns and perhaps his journey's end will be a beacon for others to follow, returning to their country through a collective decision. Perhaps the state will live up to its promises and refrain from obstructing their return. A nation is a right for all; none has the right to grant it.

*Youssef Abdelki, Welcome Home.*

It is a welcome that is far from complete, a welcome filled with bitterness and sadness and longing for the arrival of others.

***Translated from the Arabic by Elie Chalala***

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