

Mahmud – My Syrian Interpreter

Syria, an Aleppo suburb, June 16, 2012

“My dad is better!” Adel, a 5-year-old Syrian.

“No, my dad brought me 3 loaves of bread yesterday!”, an unknown Syrian child.

“Now he’s coming with my mom and you’ll see how much bread he brings!”, said Adel.

Syria, Center of Aleppo, June 16, 2012

“There was another bombing that has destroyed a number of entire buildings in the center. At this time it is unknown whether the attack was the result of Assad’s supporters or of the rebels. 17 people have perished: three women, including Shadia, one child, and the remaining were adult men.”

Syria, an Aleppo suburb, June 16, 2012

“Adel, come up to the house, your parents are running late, Allah knows when they’ll come, they’ve probably been unable to find anything”, says Adel’s grandmother.

Tbilisi, Georgia, August 28, 2013

- Obama said the use of chemical weapons will not go unpunished. Get ready, you’re going to Syria. I think they’ll still start it. Yet you were saying that you had at least achieved what was yours...
- No, no... Not in Damascus, look for the closest point somewhere in Turkey at the border...

Tbilisi, Georgia, August 29, 2013

“So, to Istanbul and then to Gaziantep?”

“Yeah, and then from there by car.”

“How long is the trip?”

“I don’t know exactly, it depends where we go - to some region of the province. We probably won’t be able to film anything tonight, the main thing is to find someplace to spend the night.”

“What the hell must we film, there’s a war in Syria, not in Turkey, right?”

“What do I know, there are some refugee camps, perhaps we might cross the border... Then we’ll see, we’ll do something...”

The operator Zaza and I are sitting at the Tbilisi Airport and trying to plan a business trip. War in Syria has already been going on for more than two years. The Arab Spring wave soon reached Syria, but turned out to be the most long-lived. Either Assad will appear to be more resilient and prepared than the other dictators, or the rebels opposing Assad - far weaker. Or the world doesn’t give a damn about it and international society has shut itself inside its own problems. In short, it is quite clear, these people are wiping each other out. Chemical weapons have already been deployed. Now crossing over into Syria, especially from Turkey, is preposterous. Money will be of no help - there will always be someone who pays more and sells you out. In a few hours I’ll be in Gaziantep. Then there will be a car and...

It is already time for the flight and I’ve still been unable to decide whether to go to Kilis or to Cirvelgözü. I will think about it during the flight.

Cirvelgözü is farther away from Gaziantep. Some Syrian villages are closer to the border there. The Turkish military base is also on that side. Thus the security zones will be stricter. The refugee camps are also large. Kilis is close by, a Syrian settlement is farther away, with comparatively less refugee camps. But permission from the Turkish government is necessary in order to film these camps. When I arrive there, it will be Friday morning. I won’t be given permission in one day. Will they even give it to me?! Oh, what do you want to do...where shall I go?!

Gaziantep, Turkey. August 29, 2013

I met my colleagues while waiting for luggage at the Gaziantep Airport.

“Hello, are you going to film at the border?”

“Yes...”

“I’m your colleague from Georgia, where are you all from?”

“Pleased to meet you, from France.”

“The same for me. Where did you decide, to Kilis or to Cirvelgözü?”

“When I go outside, I must get in a taxi and I still haven’t decided. What are your plans?”

Here I burst into laughter. I explained to him that I was in the same predicament. The Frenchman had the same thoughts as me and had the exact same arguments I did: getting permission and the travel distance. Thus we decided to go to Kilis. If we’re unable to get permission in a day, we’ll still film at the border. The trip is short. We’ll arrive soon and have more time to figure out the situation. There is one difference - the Frenchman’s interpreter lives in Gaziantep and is staying here for the night. I’m going straight to Kilis, I don’t have an interpreter, maybe I’ll find someone there.

Mesut the Taxi Driver

“Salam...”

“Merhaba...”

“Nasil sin...”

Here he is already saying some words I don’t know. Wherever you’re going, if you speak to them in the local language, even incorrectly and all jumbled up, right then they somehow became favorably disposed towards you. Well then, I also tried to begin a relationship with my very sparse Turkish (consisting of greetings and “How are you?”). Really, when he finished with “I’m fine, how was your flight”, he instantly discovered that I didn’t understand Turkish at all. He heaved a sigh and took out one of the 21st century’s primary achievements, a smart phone, from his pocket. The driver said something in Turkish and something was displayed on the screen in English. Thus we continued our relationship and we agreed to go to Kilis. Taxi drivers are amazing people. Everywhere I’ve been, every cabby knows everything. In the traditional sense, I really glean the first information from them (not counting that previously searched out online). They know all the gossip, are informed in politics in their own way, but still. There is no short supply of arguments as to why they must criticize the current government, why the previous administration was bad, but better than the current one, and why the current opposition will be the best government that has ever been. But now I’m not interested in Turkey’s news, Syria is the main thing. It will be better to make an attempt at getting some info regarding the Turkish-Syrian border and those local events from Mesut. I signal him to give me the phone and begin a telephone interpreter relationship:

“What’s happening at the border?”

“The Syrians are coming and not stopping. There is no room in the camps and they spend the night right on the streets.”

“Are they arriving in the city (Kilis), where are they?”

“They’re in Kilis, too, but primarily stay at the border...”

“Is it dangerous in Kilis? How close are the Syrian villages to the border?”

“They’re close, but I don’t think there is any danger over here. Erdogan has spent countless millions on these Syrian refugees, but yet there is no increase in our wages. These Syrians are still dissatisfied, saying ‘Why aren’t they letting us into the camps!’ There is no room and what can we do?! Kilis, in fact, has become a Syrian town. Many Syrians have settled in this city. Many of them even work, they’ve become well situated.”

“What are you saying, how have they become well situated? There’s a war in Syria and they’re forced to be here, aren’t they?”

“How do I know what they prefer, I know that they are living in our cities and working.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“I don’t know what’s going on in Erdogan’s head. Probably only Allah knows. Personally such a situation is good for me. Do you know how many journalists are already arriving? You are the third one today I’m taking to Kilis. Ask Allah for a room to be at the hotel. There is only one good hotel, all the others are terrible.”

“Really? What should I do if there is no room?”

“We’ll find one, don’t worry. If not, we’ll return to Gaziantep and go to Kilis again in the morning. Here, take this, my number is written here. If you have need of me, call me.”

It’s an interesting perspective to go to Kilis, not have a place there, come back to Gaziantep, and then once again to Kilis in the morning. Oooh, what is better than all this?! Then how will I provide material for the morning press release? Well, I might have just slept in a forest in a tent. I will find something and do something most certainly!

Still, why do people like it when you speak to them in their native language?! No, you’re speaking to them, it’s clearly exaggerated. In principle, there are some occasions when you correctly speak for yourself in a foreign language, but you basically garble it. I, for example, speak correctly in English, but when I go somewhere else, I learn the greetings and a few broken words. Yet, I have also felt that I like it when a foreigner tries to speak in Georgian. Yet why?! Is it not better to speak to me in your native language and have someone translate it for me, than to fudge up my language, make mistakes, and for you to also get tongue-tied?!

I was lost in these thoughts when Mesut slammed on the brakes. I looked out the window, we’re clearly somewhere on the main road.

“Is there a problem?”

“No problem, mister...”

We had been stopped by the police. What do these guys want?! A very brief Turkish dialogue takes place and I hear: “Gurcistan”, “Gazetci...” He had clearly told them about us. The cop yelled something to his partner and moved towards me. I began to ready my documents. He came to the window, greeted me, and asked for my documents. I showed him. The documents are written in both Georgian and English. He looks at them, examines them... I have no idea what the police officers are thinking at this time. He clearly doesn't know English, Georgian all the more so. This is not the first occurrence. I frequently find myself in such a situation. After about 7-8 minutes of thinking, the officer returned my documents and let us go.

“Mesut, do they stop you frequently?”

“No.... It's complicated now because of Syria. Many police officers are about and they are just checking on things...”

“Security measures have gotten stricter”, I can boldly begin tomorrow's broadcast if there was nothing else interesting. The highway is illuminated, there is nothing apparent to the surroundings that we're in a conflict zone. I'm awoken by the car coming to a halt. I had fallen asleep and am blinded by some red light. “TurkHotel”.

“Hello, do you have any available rooms?”

“When do you want it?”

“Now.”

“For how long?”

“Until war starts in Syria”, I try to joke.

“War began there two years ago...”

“Excuse me, it didn't come out well, I meant until America attacks.” What nonsense I'm saying, as if I corrected it?!

“Well then, for about a week, possibly longer, I don't yet precisely know.”

“It has no importance. I have no room today, neither in the next few days.”

Thus I ended the conversation with the TurkHotel concierge. Upon exiting the hotel, Mesut tells me, “That guy was a Syrian, he came to Kilis two years ago when his parents were killed during the first armed conflict. He had no wife or anyone else that would pose a risk and thus he came over into Turkey. He lives in that same hotel and knows Arabic, Turkish, and English.”

“We, the local Turks, know English poorly, not many even speak Arabic. Thus a Turk concierge was easily replaced with this Syrian by the owner and he even pays him less. Those arriving here agree to everything in order to just support themselves”, Mesut explains to me.

"I wonder if he really didn't have a room or if he was offended by my awkward humor?" This was my dominant thought after Mesut told me, "The concierge is a Syrian." "But he is employed, he wouldn't let a client go", I probably console myself. "Perhaps he was offended? No, I would be offended in his shoes. Noooo, there's no chance. There is a war in his country, he has found a job with great difficulty. What patriotism, if he had had a spot, he wouldn't have let me go. I can imagine what will happen to him when the owner hears about losing a customer because of some senseless joke. Wait, where will the owner hear of it..." In no way can I forget the three-minute interaction with the Syrian concierge...

"Mister, mister!" Mesut rouses me from my thoughts. He indicates, "Sit in the car." "There's another hotel", Mesut tells me and I get in the car. Kilis is a very strange town. It is midnight, the streets are lit and it is clearly seen that the locals are hauling trash away. The buildings are half destroyed from old age. There are cars on the street, more so mopeds. Yet it is midnight.

"Is the border far from here?"

"No, 10 minutes by car. 10 minutes now, during the day there are more cars, it will take 20-25 minutes.

"If we were to go there now?"

"Let's go, but you will stay with the Syrians under an open sky, there's no other shelter. Look, we've arrived."

Hotel Paris. Hmm... Yet, there is nothing evident that this building is a hotel. With a nod of his head, Mesut indicates that I must go up to the second floor. There is a narrow entrance way, some short and high steps. We went up. From the very exterior the building's disarray was apparent. The situation grows serious in the foyer. I'm already assailed by an unpleasant odor. I realize I can't stay here. We go into the hall. The first thing to catch my eye is a bench. Five youngsters are sitting and drinking some tea, watching TV. Some kind of Turkish information channel is on broadcasting the events in Syria. Mesut talks to the concierge in Turkish. The concierge comes towards me and begins speaking in broken English:

"Hello, here room in me hotel, good room."

"Hi, is there Wifi here?" I have hope there isn't, I don't want to stay here.

"Of course", he looks towards the router.

"How are the rooms, can you let me see them?"

"Yes, yes..."

A horror is unfolding. I don't know how to describe the odor here, a mixture of trash, a mustiness, moisture, cigarette smoke. In short, there is filthiness all around.

"Here... room, two comfortable beds."

"And a bathroom." I am happy. I have a reason to tell him no, I can't see a bathroom.

" Bathroom here out room in right, only this floor."

“Noo, I can’t stay here. I absolutely need a bathroom...”

Why was I looking for a reason? What problem was it to say no, what fault would it be of mine. But I think I was proving it to myself. There was only one alternative offered to me by Mesut in that particular moment, TurkHotel. It was the first one he took me to, the only normal hotel, and there wasn’t a room there (or they didn’t give it to me - I’m still troubled by doubt). There is either the Paris Hotel which is better to stay at than sleeping in the street, or returning to Gaziantep so I can come here once again tomorrow, go to the border, and work. There are no good choices. Especially when it is 2 o’clock in the morning. This is probably why I’m proving to myself to not stay in this Paris.

“Is there any other hotel here?”

“Why mister, you no like my hotel?”

“You know, there is no bathroom...”

“There’s a bathroom, look, here...”

“No, you don’t understand, I need a bathroom in the room. I’ve come here to work, not knowing when I’ll go out, when I’ll come in. It’s really hot here and this is why I most certainly need a bathroom in the room. Aside from this, I need to shave my beard every day.”

“Yes, yes, a bathroom, look, here it is, this floor...”

He clearly doesn’t understand what I’m saying to him...

“Who are you?!” I’m interrupted by a voice from somewhere.

I look all around, then I glance above and see a stranger. It’s a swarthy guy with very curly hair, bare-chested, shaggy with green eyes, and a sort of smiling face. The hotel was very non-standard. The inner windows of two floors looked into the hall. Some scent of some kind of fetid, eau de cologne wafted from these windows and all of this mixed with the odor of filth created one large, unbearable reality. This curly haired man was looking from one of these windows.

“I’m a journalist from Georgia, who are you yourself?”

“I’m Mahmud Dabagh, what’s your problem?”

“Wow, you speak English and even understand it... Great! Explain to him that I want a hotel that has a room with a bathroom.”

“Are you kidding me?! You want the hotel concierge to tell you the address of another hotel?”

“Yeah, what’s the problem, I need a bathroom.” What have I gotten hung up on this bathroom for, get up and go, ask Mesut to find another hotel for you. No... He will advise you to return to Gaziantep.

"Listen here, there's the Istanbul Hotel nearby, I lived there earlier. Do you have a car or did you send it off?"

"No, the man standing behind me is the driver", I gesture with my eyes. I'm speaking with Mahmud in English, I know Mesut doesn't understand it. The concierge of Paris Hotel understands some things and clearly not others.

"Very well." Mahmud looked over at Mesut and told him something in Turkish.

"Follow him, he'll take you to the Istanbul. If it's Allah's will, they'll have a room. So, what are your plans, why have you come here?"

"I want to film some things at the Syrian border, refugees, what's happening, perhaps I might cross the border..."

At this moment, Mahmud breaks out in laughter.

"Where are you crossing to, Syria? Do you want to die?!"

"Don't worry about that..."

"Do you have an interpreter? Do you know where the border is? Where the refugees are?"

"I know, definitely!" I lie to Mahmud and hope that Mesut will find everything out for me, but I don't want to only rely on the hope of the smart phone - it's just that I don't yet have an interpreter...

"I can help you", I hadn't even finished speaking when Mahmud offered to collaborate. "That cabby, don't look at him, who is he, where are you bringing him?"

"In Gaziantep, I got into his car at the airport."

"Well then, when he takes you to the Istanbul, send him off. Come to me tomorrow and I'll help you."

"And who are you, do you know what is happening where?"

"Me? I told you, didn't I? I'm Mahmud Daghab, a Syrian who arrived here last year. Believe me, I'll help you..."

"Fine, how much do you want for that help?"

"Money's not a problem, we'll reach an agreement..."

"Come on, you don't want to talk about that now, how much do you want?"

"Let's say, an entire day for a hundred, does that work for you?"

"We've agreed, it's a good price... Wait, if there's no room at the Istanbul?"

"Allah is merciful, everything will be fine..."

"Fine, in any case, I'll be here at 8 am. Be ready."

Thus I met Mahmud Daghab.