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Syria

Interview with Yassin Al-Haj Saleh

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Born in 1961 in Raqqa, the Syrian writer and dissident Yassin Al-Haj Saleh spent a considerable part of his life in the jails of the Assad regime. Once again pursued by the regime for his revolutionary activity, he went into exile in Turkey shortly before his wife Samira Khalil, a tireless communist and revolutionary militant, was abducted along with their friend Razan Zeitouneh, a human rights defender and co-worker, most likely by the Islamist group Jaish Al-Islam [Army of Islam]. Yassin, however, has continued to write, to take a firm stand, and to carry the voice of Syrian revolutionaries, who have not been forgotten by the rest of the world. Matilde Dugaucquier and Mauro Gasparini interviewed him in Istanbul in July 2017.

Can you tell us a bit about your story?

It's a long journey ... I stayed in prison for many years. I was a member of a Communist party opposed to the regime (there is still a pro-regime "Communist" party today, led by the Bagdash dynasty). When I was a medical student in Aleppo in the 1970s, I joined the Communist Party - Political Bureau [also known as the Syrian Communist Party Riyad al-Turk], which was taking stronger and stronger positions against the Assad regime. We had disagreements about the relationship with the USSR as well because we were influenced by Eurocommunism, which at the time appeared to be a more democratic and open trend. It seemed to me more progressive to defend not only social justice but also democracy and liberties.

I was in my third year of medical studies when I was imprisoned for 16 years. I was interrogated and tortured, but my life was not in danger at that time. Prison conditions were "negotiable" for about 14 years. Then they deteriorated and were extremely hard in the 16th year, which I spent in the terrible prison of Palmyra. At first, I was entitled to family visits and books. The books saved me. I love reading and I learned more in prison than at university. These were years of learning, through books, friends, comrades. It was obviously very difficult to lose 16 years of my youth in prison. But at the same time, you can resist and change yourself. That's what I did, unconsciously and that was what I had to do in those circumstances. I wrote a book about this formative and emancipatory experience. I'm told it's more a book on liberation than on imprisonment, by the way.

In 2000, I was finally able to finish my medical studies, but I never practiced. I had not been brave and confident enough to become a writer and translator, but that's what I'd always wanted to do. I then wrote some articles and translations. The year 2000 was also the year of the death of Hafez El-Assad and the passing of power to his son Bashar. I moved to Damascus, it was a good place to observe the changes underway and the elements of continuity.

The era of Bashar brought new policies, especially at the economic level, with the deepening of liberalization. A class of nouveaux riches, who had used their privileged positions in the regime's apparatus to ensure their ascent and enrichment, began to take power and control of the state. This is the meaning of the liberalisations of the 2000s.

I was in a position to observe and write about all this, but of course I suffered censorship: I had to go to court ten times for writing or saying this or that Two weeks after the revolution began, after Assad's first speech on March 13, 2011, I decided to go into hiding. I did not want self-censorship anymore. Because we had just entered a new stage of our history where finally we could say what we thought.

With the help of many friends, I left our home in Damascus where I had lived for three years and settled alone in the suburbs for two years. After that, there was not much sense in staying: I was not useful to the revolution and it

became dangerous with all the checkpoints and the mukhabarat [intelligence services] that came into the houses of the neighbourhood. So, I left in April 2013 for Douma, in eastern Ghouta, not far from Damascus. After I arrived in Douma, our friend Razan Zeitouneh joined me with my wife Samira Khalil.

My idea was to go to Raqqa, which at that time was out of the regime's control. I thought I could learn things and help on the spot. But I was only able to leave Douma in July 2013. One of my brothers was kidnapped and along the way, a friend told me that my older brother Firas had also been kidnapped. The situation was bad, I could not go in and the trip was very dangerous. Few people knew where I was. One of them, my doctor, was also kidnapped on November 2, 2013. In the meantime, I left Syria for Turkey. I had been there for less than two months when Samira and Razan were abducted ... I have been living in Turkey ever since.

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Can you put the Syrian revolution in perspective? What is its significance for the country, the region, and globally?

The context is obviously the "Arab Spring" that began after this young Tunisian, who had been insulted and humiliated, immolated himself. At that time, the idea of "revolutions of dignity" was making its way. I wrote an article about this just three weeks before the outbreak of the revolution in Syria. People were fed up with the insults of the security services, being forced to pay bribes for anything and everything. We did not want to be humiliated by those in power, we did not want to pay for everything, and many were already poor enough. People wanted to reappropriate politics, talk about public issues in public, take active public space together to say "no", to sing, to act ... The Syrian people had been living under the threshold of extreme political poverty for decades. We were not allowed to say what we thought, or to express ourselves about public matters, or to gather, not even in private spaces. Hence the importance of gatherings in the public space, of dozens, hundreds or thousands of people.

But we were faced with a real war from the very beginning. That's why I think it's not fair to deny the Syrian people the right to face a regime at war with them with weapons. We wanted to reclaim politics peacefully, they wanted to stop us by shooting at us. So, we wanted to break the state monopoly on weapons. For the longer the state monopolises violence, the longer it reduces us to slavery. And we succeeded after six or seven months of continuous deaths ...

It is certain that this process contains many contradictions but taking up arms was absolutely legitimate and ethical in my opinion. No offense to some revisionists, breaking the monopoly of state violence was one of the major political turning points in Syria.

Of course, the end of this monopoly has also benefited groups like Al-Nusra / Al-Qaeda and Daesh. But that was not the only cause, far from it. These groups are linked to other dynamics, such as the presence of al-Qaeda in Iraq after the US occupation and the support that the Syrian regime gave them for years; also the release by Assad of hundreds of Salafists who were in Syrian jails, including Sadnaya; or the Salafist networks in the Gulf and the masses of petrodollars in the hands of religious people who have nothing to do other than paying fanatics in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. This explains the emergence of these groups.

Throughout all these years, many foreign powers have intervened, but the Syrian people have not been significantly supported by any international power. China and Russia paralyzed the UN Security Council, which gave birth to the group of "Friends of Syria": the United States, France, the Arab countries and so on. And it was the United States that killed this so-called group, especially after the 2013 chemical massacres and the agreement that followed. This agreement, the most sordid and criminal that there was between the United States and Russia, gave a license to kill to Assad, by all possible means except the one that these powers prohibit.

In fact, even chemical weapons have not been banned since it has been established that many attacks have been conducted since, including chlorine gas. This was possible as long as the regime massacred noiselessly, as long as it avoided a massive massacre like in Khan Sheikhoun this year. With the 2013 chemical agreement, Islamist nihilist organizations like Nusra and Daesh have received a huge boost to their recruitment campaign. Committing such crimes gives these groups an excuse to do what they want. The Syrians were not protected after such a massacre and the nihilist organizations were able to say: "Look, the world has nothing to do with us, they are all our enemies and enemies of Islam."

And in a sense, they are right, even if they have no solution to the problems of Syrians –but no one currently has those solutions. The opposition is in a bad state. Its members, from my generation, are too dependent on the regional powers and do not represent a credible and viable alternative to the regime. The United States intervened in 2014 only against Daesh, and first in Kobane, where they delivered food and weapons, which has never happened elsewhere. A year later, the Russians intervened.

The United States is leading an international coalition today, with many countries. We have four of the five members of the Security Council who are at war in Syria against organizations responsible for 5% of civilian deaths. The person responsible for more than 90% of these deaths, Bashar Al-Assad is still there and can continue his misdeeds. I often speak of a "Syrianized" world: since this chemical agreement, it is not only Syria, but the situation of the world in which we live, and it becomes more and more clear that is a world in crisis...

Kobane had a great resonance in Western Europe and many progressives took a stand for Kurdish autonomy in Syria. What do you think of the situation in Rojava?

There are two agendas: that of Kurdish rights in Syria, which I defend and which I have always defended, and that of the PKK. Syria has become a new field for their struggle and puts them in better shape vis-à-vis the Turkish government. That's why they are in Raqqa today and they are hunting residents of the city. They are a tool in the hands of the Americans under cover of their war on terror. Many people on the left, who do not know anything about Syria, take sides with this authoritarian and ultranationalist party –of course I know their propaganda, their idea of democratic confederalism, but it is empty of content ... There is already a concentration camp where 8,000 people accused of being members of Daesh are locked up. And they have to prove the opposite to get out.

Thanks to Daesh, some criminals look cleaner than they really are. I do not mean that the PYD is criminal, but it is clear that they are not the ones who decide the goals. They do not control anything of their struggle, it is the Americans who decide everything, and they are moving away from their ideal: freedom and an autonomous Kurdish region. Afrin, a Kurdish region north of Aleppo, is now threatened by the Turks. Who will defend Afrin, if they are all in Raqqa? The Americans are brutal, arrogant and at the same time stupid. They are guided by ideas from colonial anthropology that view the Arabs as a people made up of tribes only. And the Kurds are a tool in this approach to Syria in general, and the fight against Daesh in particular. They use a modernist discourse that speaks to the Western middle classes, especially by highlighting these unveiled women fighters. But this is not something new that the Kurds of Syria have invented, it has to do with the historical struggle of the PKK. The PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK in Turkey and it shows expansionist tendencies in Syria.

People in Europe should at least have a more nuanced view of this situation. I support the separation of the Kurds, but in practice it is almost impossible. If we want to be rational, a Kurdish state that includes part of Turkey, one of Iraq, another of Iran and of course one of Syria, that makes sense. But in Syria alone, it does not have any. Of course, autonomy, some form of federalization is possible and desirable.

What can still be done to support the demands of the Syrian people? What would you say to those who want to make alive the hopes awakened by the Syrian revolution?

All politics in Syria should focus on the rights of refugees, bereaved and injured people, who represent a very high percentage of the population. And we know that the Geneva process ignores these problems. Our priority is therefore (and here you can help) to defend the rights of those who have been tortured, killed, humiliated, who have lost their homes, their jobs and of course the 80% who live below the poverty line. Today, in Syria, to be revolutionary (or to have simple ethical principles) is to think of politics in these terms. And I am sorry that the traditional opposition does not take these issues into account. I think we can build the Syrian cause around these issues, even if it is not easy and if we are isolated ...

I was invited to Brussels in April for a rally of Syrian civil society groups under the patronage of Staffan de Mistura [UN Special Envoy for Syria]. Part of the agenda was about peacekeeping. I was surprised they invited me and I said, "I can come but I do not agree with your agenda. If you accept it, I can suggest something else and try to convince the audience."

And they refused, we had to accept the agenda they imposed. I really felt that I was being denied the right to represent my cause and to set priorities, to have a say in who really knows what's going on and to defend the rights of victims. These people want to take ownership of our change. They consider that change will have to take place if it suits them. Macron said recently that there is no alternative in Syria. No alternative for whom? For you or for us? We would take anyone! [laughs] There is no need for an alternative to put a criminal out, full stop! It's our society and you do not have the right to ask us for guarantees. Besides, we guarantee that it will be a big mess for many years to come. It's always a mess after revolutions! But for Americans and Europeans, the lesser evil is Bashar Al-Assad, who is responsible for the death of 90% of our victims. For them what matters are not our lives, but the threats to their interests.

What links can you draw between the reality of the revolutionary processes in the Arab world and what we draw from the legacy of the Russian revolution of 1917?

In fact, I do not have the answers to all that. There is a crisis of revolutionary thought in the world, a crisis of reflections on political change and the global situation. More and more, I realize that there are no real revolutionary forces anywhere in the world. There are individuals of course, and small groups and organizations but no historic revolutionary movement today. This may be one of the effects of globalization in recent decades: the privileged become stronger, control the media and the public space, create a demand for security with the fear of immigrants, Muslims, "terrorists" ... It seems that this strategy has been victorious so far. There is fragmentation of the political field in each country and at the global level. It is a paradox: on the one hand, people know more about one another, the world is gradually becoming unified; on the other hand, there is a gradual fragmentation of political life, even in Western countries. These dynamics may explain why we do not see revolutionary movements capable of unifying struggles, linking contradictions and developing a revolutionary strategy. I hope it's just a matter of time. I hope to be an agent in explaining and participating in the change. But for now, I do not see any way out of this situation. We, the revolutionary agents of change, are in a position of extreme weakness and we have many struggles to be waged within the Left itself.

I think the traditional left is no longer revolutionary or even progressive. As Syrians, we have good reason to complain and resent these left-wingers in the West, but also in our country or in Turkey. The perspectives of this left are outdated, it remains stuck in politics from above, and persuaded that imperialism is something that lies somewhere in the United States or London and not a global system. I wrote a long article on Syria and the "anti-imperialist" left.

How do you perceive the Western left in general and more particularly its role in the Syrian crisis?

The left is composed mainly of people from the middle classes, which are not revolutionary classes. The typical

western left-wing activist or activist today has a passport, has a good university, can visit many countries, read the books he / she wants. These people are not threatened with arrest for such writings or words, can organize rallies in the streets and squares. They can demonstrate, say no, say that Trump is an animal and at the same time, these left-wing people tend to want to give us lessons. That's what I do not like: they do not know much about Syria and have not provided any interesting or original idea about the country. That goes for Chomsky, Fisk, Patrick Cockburn, of course Tariq Ali ...

I also think that the revolutionary forces should forget about the Soviet Union. When I was 20 or 30 years old, it was very important for my generation to criticize the Soviet Union. Perhaps today it serves to justify liberalism, neo-liberalism and liberal democracy in the West. Of course, liberalism is not a utopia and we really need a utopia. And in a way, dystopian creations like Daesh and even Al Assad are the symptoms of the absence of a new project that allows us to move forward. Without a global progressive project, we cannot work at the national level, whether in Belgium, Syria or Egypt. Still, we must forget the Soviet Union as well as those who cannot forget this experience or criticize it. You, the younger generations, are in a better position to think about this, especially because you are mobile, you can meet people, immigrants, refugees. You can find out more about Syria, Palestine, South Africa ...

You said that we need a new project for the left and you mentioned internationalism, at least a left more aware of what is happening in other countries and more able to practice solidarity and to understand other societies, to communicate ... But it seems that we are far from having groups and networks that are strong enough to build this solidarity'

It was easier in the past, when we identified ourselves through the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. After the experience of twentieth century socialism and the transformations of capitalism, I think we need more than that. Our problems are not only related to traditional forms of exploitation but also to the capacity of capitalism to turn any struggle into a religious, ethnic, racial, sectarian conflict ... In your countries, this translates into hostility towards non-whites. We are more affected by sectarian politics. It is therefore not enough to say that the bourgeoisie distorts the consciousness of the masses. Ideas about identity politics first appeared in the left, especially in the United States and in Europe to a certain extent, a progressive movement to defend identities marginalized by the system: black people, other people of colour, Muslims, Jews... I think we have to rethink this problem because, when social struggles are racialized, sectarianized or racialized, they carry within them the possibility of massacres and genocides.

There is also the problem of the environment. Twentieth century socialism has been as terrible for the environment as capitalism because of the development and growth cult that it has developed. Both systems shared the same cult of industry, control of nature. Today, global warming represents a great threat to our region, the Middle East and also to Africa. In a way, the Syrian revolution is linked to this problem: three or four years before the revolution we had bad seasons and more than 300,000 families were affected. In the future we could see waves of refugees who are not related to politics or war but to global warming

Can we say that the Syrian revolution, and the Arab Spring as a whole, has revealed the weakness of the international left and the magnitude of the task ahead? And what does the counter-revolution look like today? Of course, we have one of the worst examples in Syria, whether at the national or international level, state and non-state armed groups.

I used to say that we have three enemies in Syria, not one: the regime and its allies – which today are Iran, Hezbollah and Russia; the Islamist-nihilist organizations of the global jihad (I speak of Sunni jihad, since the Shiite jihad is allied with the regime) – these come perhaps from a hundred different countries, that is to say it is a global conflict, especially since Syrian people are everywhere now [...]; the third is imperialism, and I do not speak here only of American imperialism, but also of Russian imperialism.

Interview with Yassin Al-Haj Saleh

It's not just a battle against the regime, it's a huge battle and it's not just about us anymore.

So, I think that on a global scale today, to be revolutionary is to fight against these three enemies.

Against local authoritarian regimes like ours (or that of Sissi in Egypt, or the Lebanese army which, just a few days ago, humiliated and killed Syrian refugees after arresting them). Against nihilist organizations that are certainly Islamist today but could take another form ... Olivier Roy said that what we are witnessing today is an Islamization of radicalism, not a radicalization of Islam. It means that many people are searching for radicalism today and want to fight imperialism. And that's how they become Islamists. Many of them do not come from families where Islam is practiced, but Islam provides a cultural base for their emotions.

We must therefore give a new meaning to life, invent new situations, new experiences, new practices when we fight against these three enemies: the ruling elites, the nihilist, Islamist or other organizations, and against global hegemonies. This battle must aim at appropriating the world, as in Syria we wanted to reclaim our country. We are the population of this planet and we want to take it back from those who rob it ...

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