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Syria

Interview with Marwan Othman

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Marwan Othman, aged 45, identifies himself as a Trotskyist and is one of the leaders of Yekiti, the second most influential party among Syrian Kurds. A poet, he has spent nearly four years in prison at various times for crimes of opinion. As a guest of the Pen Club International he was able to leave Syria to visit Paris and Brussels, although he intends to return to the country. He advocates an alliance with the Syrian left to democratize the regime and was present at the football match on March 25, 2004 which led to confrontations with the police which left dozens dead. His party supports the demand for the granting of basic rights to Syria's two million Kurds and more autonomy in the framework of the Syrian state.

Can you talk about the situation of the Kurds in Syria?

For some years, the Syrian regime has been trying to Arabize Kurdish culture. The Kurds have no right to be taught in their own language. Our objective is that Syria should respect what it is, a mosaic of peoples. We demand that the Syrian state ends the banning of our language and our culture. We demand the kind of minority rights that exist in other countries. And, obviously, the liberation of all political prisoners. Out of a total of two million Kurds in Syria, around 250,000 have no papers and thus no Syrian nationality and no right to work in the public sector or buy land or a house. It is necessary then to give Syrian nationality to all these people. President Bashar al-Assad wants to stop the Kurds and the Arabs struggling together for the democratization of the Syrian regime. The Syrian state is afraid of the Kurds. We are politically well organized and representative while the Arab parties do not have as much popular support. President Bashar al-Assad fears above all a strategic alliance between Kurds and left Arabs. So he does all he can to deepen the division between the two peoples. On December 10, 2003 for example, Kurds and Arabs organized a demonstration together for the first time in Syria.

Why were you imprisoned and how did you get out of prison?

I went to prison after a demonstration in front of the Syrian parliament in December 2002, on the international day of human rights. We wanted to demonstrate for human rights in Syria. Our political party Yekiti (United) had decided to organize this demonstration to open a window in a country where fear reigns. But the government banned the demonstration and as usual me and my friends, who had organized the demonstration, were arrested and imprisoned. With these arrests the Syrian government wished to scare the Syrian people to stop them from doing what we did, but this didn't work, because when we appeared before the court, there were twice as many people there as during the demonstration. And everybody got up when we came in. After a year and two months we were released following international pressure, notably from Amnesty International and the Pen Club International.

What do you and your party think about an eventual US intervention in Syria as in Iraq?

We are opposed, because if you look at recent events in the Middle East it is very clear that the US wishes to increase its domination. So we have organized demonstrations in front of the Syrian parliament to pressure the Syrian government to resolve the Kurdish problem and that of democracy in Syria. We told the president of the parliament that we did not want to be a Trojan horse for anybody. Syria is our country but the regime must consider us as Syrian citizens with the same rights as other citizens. We never want to serve as a tool for a foreign power. To prevent the Kurds or other oppressed Syrian citizens seeking a solution from the outside, the regime should grant us our legitimate rights. The US already has a special agenda for the Middle East, but this agenda can never coincide with the agenda of its peoples. One day the Americans must go. The Arabs and the Kurds are condemned to live together, like all peoples in the whole world, and thus our problems will not be settled by the Americans or other

foreign forces.

What do you think of the embargo imposed by the US against Syria?

The embargo in the region always hurts the people, not the governments. For example, the embargo against Iraq made the Iraqi government stronger, while the Iraqi people became poorer. Instead of opening windows for the peoples, an embargo closes them and makes the regime still more inflexible. Life becomes more difficult and there are more obstacles to democratization because of the embargo. This becomes a pretext for the regime.

What is your strategy to bring about a democratization of the Syrian regime?

The peoples of Kurdistan (Assyrian, Syrian, Armenian, Kurd, Arab, Turkmen) in all parts of Kurdistan have suffered much oppression. There have been massacres. And there is a problem with the Syrian left. It has never said anything against the oppression of the Kurds. It is a problem because to prevent the US from using the Kurdish problem to intervene, we need to overcome the division between the Kurds and the left, between the Kurds and the Arabs so that the left and the democratic parties build bases and bridges to resolve the Kurdish problem. The Kurds alone do not have the strength to democratize Syria. The left alone neither. So we need an alliance between the two. Before reproaching the Kurds for their links with foreign forces, the Syrian left should attempt to make links with us, precisely to cut the grass from under the feet of all those who are tempted to ally with foreign forces to resolve the Kurdish problem in Syria. Because it is necessary to understand that if you are in a ditch you grab any rope to get out of it.

When and why did you become a Trotskyist and what does this mean today?

Since my youth the left has attracted me. At the university of Syria, left ideas were dominant. In the 1970s, Marxism spread everywhere. After having read books on the Soviet Union, I understood that the regime was a Stalinist regime that did not represent Marxism. This led me to follow other trails, other non-Stalinist Marxist branches. I read many books by Mao and Trotsky. I noted that Trotsky's position was close to that of Marx. I saw also that Trotskyism could renew things and create novelties, more than the other Marxist currents. In 1983, I adopted "Marxism according to Trotsky". Immediately we created a Trotskyist group among the Syrian Kurds and this group met many difficulties with the government, but also with the other left groups among the Kurds and Arabs. We had relations with the Fourth International. In 1986, our small group organized a demonstration, the first in Syria that celebrated the Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, our national symbol. It was a great success. Thousands of Kurds came out to demonstrate. Then all eyes are fixed on us and most of our Trotskyist group were arrested. That placed us in great difficulty. We could not continue all alone. We created links with the parties of the Kurdish left which accepted Trotskyists inside them. This was the case with the party of Kurdish peasants. This party accepted us inside it as a Trotskyist branch. After this, in 1992, with three other parties, we created the Yekiti (United) party. This party accepted all left currents. I am now one of the members of the leadership of Yekiti as a known Trotskyist.

How long were you in prison for and how did you keep your morale up?

I was arrested in 1981, I spent a month in prison because we celebrated Newroz at university and I was the organizer. In 1984, I was arrested again and I came out of prison after the presidential amnesty. In 1986, I went to prison again, because I had again organized a celebration of Newroz. In 1988, I spent three months in prison. They arrested me again in 1992 for some months and the last time was in 2002. Because of all these arrests, I never finished my studies. I was always on the run. When I wanted to return to university I was not accepted. In all I spent nearly four years in prison.

In a country like Syria, if you make the choice of becoming an oppositional political militant, you know in advance that

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you will be arrested. As my project was to change Syria, democratize it for all its citizens, Kurds and Arabs, I knew that I would be imprisoned. Syrian prisons are very tough, because there is an inhuman relationship between guards and prisoners. They want to kill our souls. The torture is not only physical, it is above all psychological. But as I knew that my people supported me, I could keep my morale high, I was able to preserve my ideas and continue my activities after being released. I know already that in going back I will again be imprisoned in Syria, but that doesn't bother me.