A Letter to the Progressive International

written by Yassin al-Haj Saleh | September 23, 2020



When a new "Progressive International" invited Syria's Yassin al-Haj Saleh to join, he was happy to accept. When he then submitted this letter for their publication, they ceased contacting him without explanation.

[Al-Jumhuriya Editor's note: In April, the Syrian writer and Al-Jumhuriya co-founder Yassin al-Haj Saleh was invited to join the advisory council of the Progressive International, a new movement seeking to "unite, organize, and mobilize progressive forces" around the world, involving well-known figures such as Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy, and Yanis Varoufakis. The below letter was to be al-Haj Saleh's inaugural contribution to the movement's media arm, Wire; envisaged as a platform "for the world's progressive forces, translating and disseminating critical perspectives and stories from the grassroots around the world." The letter, however, was never published by Wire, which ceased correspondence with al-Haj Saleh without explanation. It is published here by Al-Jumhuriya, with minor edits, for the first time.]

Dear comrades and friends,

It is a pertinent and timely moment for us to come together and work for a new international, active, progressive, and genuinely democratic world. So many of our problems today are global in nature, with no possibility of finding merely national solutions for any of them. The Coronavirus crisis shows this with renewed clarity, although environmental degradation has been demonstrating it for a generation at least. I would add another global problem: the double-headed beast of racism and the "War on Terror." This War is by no means an actual war, but rather in effect the torture of whole societies, and I see torture as a socio-political practice of creating races. Torture belongs to a family of evils, the other members of which are slavery, colonialism, and genocide. By torture, which is a cruel game played by torturers on the boundaries between the lives and deaths of the tortured, masters and slaves are created: races, in other words. No shortage of "theory" is invoked to justify and legitimize this. Everything can be employed in the service of the racist scriptures: modernity; secularism; the War on Terror; even anti-imperialism.

It happens that my country, Syria, was a torture state for decades before it became a major theater of the War on Terror, in which so many of the world's crime agencies have demonstrated their skill by joining this torturous war; Bashar "Chemical" Assad leading their way. After the Syrian uprising began in March 2011, Assad's regime abolished the state of emergency that had been in effect in the country since the first Baathist coup of March 1963, only to replace it with laws of "combating terror," moving thus from one form of what Agamben calls a state of exception to another. The move was simply a continuation of an exterminatory war on political organizations and independent initiatives.

In Syria today, which has now been ruled by the Assad family for a whole half-century, and where the privatized state called on foreign powers to protect its ownership of the country, we enjoy no

fewer than five occupations: Israeli; Iranian; American; Russian; and Turkish. There are plenty of sub-state actors as well: Hezbollah, which is a Lebanese satellite of Iran; additional Shia Islamist militias from Iraq and Afghanistan; the Kurdish PYD, which is the Syrian branch of the PKK in Turkey; the al-Qaeda offshoot currently known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham; and various other smaller Salafi-jihadist groups. In its heyday between 2014 and 2017, the Islamic State/Daesh managed to attract jihadists to its ranks from almost half of the world's countries, a feat rivaling the UN and its organizations as an international body. Jihadism is a sort of Islamic international, whose imaginary is haunted by specters of transnational Muslim empires of the past.

With so much of the world in Syria, and as many as 6.5 million Syrians (just under 30% of the population) displaced outside the country, scattered around the world, present-day Syria is a denationalized nation, a non-homeland. If we understand internationalism as a progressive and positive denationalization of the world, then the curious situation of Syria should be an analytical starting point. The country is a microcosm of a world which has become a macro-Syria. To understand Syria greatly helps us understand the world today, and I believe the failure of understanding and analysis is worse than the failure of solidarity with the subaltern millions in the country. I mean not to be harsh, but most of the prevailing analysis is truly pathetic, showing rare levels of oversimplification and poverty of knowledge: sheer ignorance, in short. One cannot but be amazed at the active worldlessness that has been rebellious Syrians' lot: to be told that Putinist Russia's protection of a genocidal regime is legitimate; or to hear sympathy expressed for a serial murderer like Iran's Qassem Soleimani, rather than the victims on whose blood he walked victoriously in Aleppo and many other parts of Syria. These are just two among innumerable examples of dehumanized people being told for almost a full decade now that they are irrelevant, indeed ostracized from the world. That is why I believe a new international that ignores or marginalizes the gravest international crime of this century so far, or that does not challenge these conditions of worldlessness and misrepresentation in both theory and practice, is dooming itself to failure.

It came to many of us Syrian leftists and democrats as a shock that our struggle for democracy, justice, and dignity was dismissed by anti-imperialists in the West, and indeed globally. It appears the regime narrative was accepted by many. The wised-up came to convince themselves that there were "no good guys" over there; a catchphrase formulated by that close friend of Syria's murderous *mukhabarat*, the British journalist Robert Fisk (whose knowledge of Arabic, after more than 40 years living in the region, is such that he believes the word is "*muhabarat*"). This is worse than a mistake. It replaces knowledge of the present with a remembrance, even nostalgia, for the past; put simply, it sticks to early Cold War ways of thinking and judging. This is a recipe for an old and reactionary international, not a new and progressive one. Syria is a privatized state, owned by a ferocious dynasty of mafiosi, whose highest aim is to stay in power forever, even at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives and surrendering the country to such cruel "protectors" as Iran, Russia, and their satellites.

The comprehensive failure of international forces, anti-imperialists included, vis-à-vis this century's principal struggle is symptomatic of an even larger crisis: their disorientation, and lack of a vision and project.

We are in need, at the global level, of what might be called a third solidarity movement. The first came after Bandung, and survived for some two decades. Its center of gravity was the newly-independent countries, where ideas of Afro-Asian solidarity, or the peoples of the "Tricontinent," were widely held. It was the time of decolonization and the socialist ideal. This first solidarity occurred between nationalist governments in the Third World, and it unraveled in the 1980s with the ascendance of brutal oligarchic regimes in many Asian, African, and Latin American countries, and the gradual decline from the 1970s onwards of the communist and socialist bloc that supported

nonalignment against the common enemy; the capitalist West.

By the late 1980s, capitalism had achieved its biggest victory in a century. In the ‘90s, a second movement of solidarity with the victims of oppression, dictatorship, and discrimination against minorities started to appear in the West. Progressive-minded people adopted causes from the “Third World,” or oppressed communities in Europe itself, building organizations and networks to support this cause or that, usually in a patronizing way. The politics of solidarity have been atomized, with no efforts to bring the disparate causes together. Perhaps supporters of the Palestinian cause, for example, might cooperate with anti-racism activists, but in general causes and the solidarity movements attached to them are separate, intellectually and organizationally. One easily discerns an unequal power relationship in solidarity activities, whereby the causes of the oppressed and their agents are patronized by Western solidarity networks, and a “market” of causes emerges, with oligopolistic tendencies. Like many Syrians, I have had unhappy experiences with this sort of solidarity activism in Turkey and Europe, on which I reflected in my article, “A critique of solidarity.”

Now, then, is the time for a third solidarity movement on a global scale. It should be more affirmative, aimed at global regime change. To pit causes against one other, granting some solidarity while ignoring others, is by no means a progressive policy. We need more systematic analyses that show the roots of the problems of racism and poverty, and the crises of health and the environment. The clash of victimhoods to which the second solidarity structure was susceptible must be avoided, indeed condemned. The stage of this third solidarity is the world. International ideals are irreconcilable with Eurocentric visions and visualizations. What brings us together is partnership based on equality and equity, though asymmetric temporalities and different autonomies of struggles are basic principles for a decentralized and radically democratic international.

The Progressive International can be an active agent in this third solidarity. I would have preferred a different name for the initiative; a young friend suggested “Planetary Dignity,” which I find more creative and progressive. The name refers to the home of humans and non-humans alike who are existentially threatened by capitalism and the worship of power and profit. Dignity is the value that encompasses other values, and that requires respect for ourselves, everyone else, and life itself. Regardless, I believe we are indeed heading toward a new wave of international and planetary-minded movements. Plurality is needed within each movement, as it is essential for a more democratic world.

May we be partners in the struggle for a better life for humans, and better humanity for life.

Yours,

Yassin al-Haj Saleh

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