Syria and the Left

written by Yassin Al Haj Saleh | January 14, 2015

Yassin Al Haj Saleh is one of Syria's leading political dissidents. He spent from 1980-1996 in Syrian prisons and became one of the key intellectual voices of the 2011 Syrian uprising. He spent 21 months in hiding within Syria, eventually escaping to Istanbul. He was interviewed via email by New Politics *co-editor Stephen R. Shalom in early November 2014.*

New Politics: You have written eloquently about the ongoing struggle for progressive values in Syria. In most Western nations, particularly in the United States, the left has relatively little power. What do you think the Western left could best do to express its solidarity with the Syrian revolution?

Yassin Al Haj Saleh: I am afraid that it is too late for the leftists in the West to express any solidarity with the Syrians in their extremely hard struggle. What I always found astonishing in this regard is that mainstream Western leftists know almost nothing about Syria, its society, its regime, its people, its political economy, its contemporary history. Rarely have I found a useful piece of information or a genuinely creative idea in their analyses. My impression about this curious situation is that they simply do not see us; it is not about us at all. Syria is only an additional occasion for their old anti-imperialist tirades, never the living subject of the debate. So they do not really need to know about us. For them the country is only a black box about which you do not have to learn its internal structure and dynamics; actually it has no internal structure and dynamics according to their approach, one that is at the same time Western-centered and high-politics centered.

The problem is that their narrow anti-imperialist worldview only sees Obama, Putin, Holland, Erdoğan, Khamenei, Qatari Emir Hamad, Saudi King Abdullah, Hassan Nasrallah, and Bashar al-Assad. Possibly they see also Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. We, rank-and-file Syrians, refugees, women, students, intellectuals, human rights activists, political prisoners … do not exist.

I think this high-politics, Western-centered worldview is better suited for the right and the ultra-right fascists. But honestly I've failed to discern who is right and who is left in the West from a leftist Syrian point of view. And I tend to think that these are the poisonous effects of the Soviet experience, fascist in its own way. Many Western leftists are the orphans of the late father, the USSR.

Besides, what prevents them from seeing the victims of Bashar, when they see perfectly well ordinary people in Kobanê? Why wasn't there the slightest interest in the slaughter of 700 people at the hands of ISIS thugs themselves in Deir Ezzor last August? One is forced to ask: Do victims have different values based on who their murderers are? Why, as the regime is bombing many regions in the country every day, killing dozens of people every day, are the leftists in the West as silent as the rightists? Could the reason be that the public killer Bashar and his elegant wife are symbols of the First World inside Syria, a couple with whom those in the First World identify easily?

Before helping Syrians or showing solidarity with Syrians, the mainstream Western left needs to help themselves. Their views are totally misguided, and the Syrian cause was only a litmus test of their reactionary and decadent perspectives.

As a Syrian, I only need them if they are well-informed. Syria is a microcosm, and I do not think that the nature of their understanding and their policies in relation to the macrocosm is in any way better when their position on the Syrian cause is mistaken to this degree.

Of course, these remarks are not meant to deny the existence of a small number of courageous dissident Western leftists who saved the moral and political dignity of the left in the United States and the West at large.

NP: Some Western leftists believe that they ought to oppose deliveries of arms by Western governments to the Free Syrian Army, or any of its constituent forces. Others believe that we ought to call for the provision of Western arms. And still others believe that we should neither call for nor oppose such deliveries. What is your view?

YHS: As I have already said, this is too late to be spoken about. The life of this discussion is now utterly separate from the actual facts on the ground. The FSA is far weaker and less unified now, after three years of its ascendance as an armed resistance against the fascist regime.

For one's position against arms deliveries to the FSA to make sense, two conditions would have to be met: 1) that the deliveries of arms from Russia and of personnel from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon are stopped in some way; and 2) that the regime expresses genuine preparedness for a political solution. Actually, for 44 months the regime never showed any willingness for power sharing or even real negotiations with the opposition.

When you do not help the ones who were compelled to take up arms to defend their people, and you leave the people killed in the hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, while the UN does nothing, and the Friends of the Syrian People group (supposedly formed to give legitimacy to helping Syrians from outside the UN Security Council, crippled by Russian and Chinese vetoes), led by Washington, is stricken with complete paralysis, what do you think will happen? Practically, you are encouraging increased numbers of Syrians to withdraw their trust from the world and international justice, and you are nurturing nihilism. I wrote a long essay about this in May 2012. Nihilism among the combatants was only beginning at that time.

There is a widespread illusion amongst the leftists in the West that the United States is siding with the Syrian revolution. Completely false. The United States government is far more against the revolution than it is against the Assad regime. Washington destroyed our cause far more than Iran and Russia did. Only a few months ago, the Harvard man in the White House spoke dismissively about the farmers and dentists who thought that they could topple the Assad regime. Is there a way to interpret this redundant observation but as a sign to the camp led by an ophthalmologist and Shabbeeha [government thugs], supported massively by Russia, Iran, and its satellites in Lebanon and Iraq, that they can go unhindered in their killing business, with the blessings of the head of the Friends of the Syrian People group? And was the chemical deal in September 2013 interpreted differently by Syrians on both sides? The regime rightly thought it was license to go on with its killing business using other weapons. And in this the opposition could not disagree with the regime's understanding.

I only want to add that the United States did not intervene against the regime after the chemical massacre in August 2013. Now, punishing a criminal ruling junta for its crimes against its subjects is far more just and progressive than is the custom for U.S. interventions around the world. That is why I do not understand why there were protests before an intervention that did not take place, and not a stir against the present intervention, which is less ethical and just in my opinion.

Do the leftists not really know that the "imperial center" is against the Syrian revolution? I do not believe that they are that ignorant. Maybe they are salvaging their archaic paradigms.

NP: Some Western leftists believe that they ought to oppose military training by Western governments to the Free Syrian Army, or any of its constituent forces. Others believe that they ought

to call for such military training. And still others believe that they should neither call for nor oppose such training. What is your view?

YHS: Well, I do not trust U.S. intentions and I do not expect anything good from Washington. I do not share the essentialist anti-imperialism that does not understand imperialism as a relation and a process, only an essence ensconcing in Washington and maybe other Western capitals, never in Moscow or Tehran. Nevertheless, our experiences with American policies in our region justify more than just suspicion. The nihilist and fascist ISIS did not arise *ex nihilo.* One of its components is the absolute distrust of the international laws, institutions, and order. (The two other main sources are modernity-related Islam disease, and tyrannical corrupt regimes).

But, to come back to the question, for what and against whom do the Americans want to train Syrian personnel?

In the last two months the Americans have openly appended our cause to their war-on-terrorism agenda. Their war on ISIS is saying that the regime that killed or caused the killing of more than 200 thousand people is only a detail; the thuggish entity of ISIS is the real danger. And of course American military training will follow the American political priorities, using Syrians as tools in their (the Americans') war, not for concluding our struggle for change in Syria.

In short, I think that the outcome of the American program of training Syrians will be to completely destroy the weakened FSA, converting it into cheap local mercenaries without a cause, confronting the fascists of ISIS for years for the Americans' sake, and giving their backs to the fascists of Assad.

In sum, I am among those who adamantly oppose the American military training of Syrians.

NP: The United States has conducted bombing raids in Iraq and Syria. How do you see these raids, in terms of their effects and in terms of their justification?

YHS: Their effect is limited; their justification is not related to any ethical cause or universal values. The situation in my opinion is like this: the Americans, who are hardly innocent, are killing killers while turning a blind eye to another killer busy killing nearby, at times just a few hundred meters from the Americans' killing fields. Where is the just cause? Never mind justice, where is politics? Never mind politics, what is the strategy behind this campaign?

I think this course of events will lead to nothing. Air bombardments may weaken ISIS, but it will keep its power to attack or even to expand. ISIS is not an army with heavy equipment nor a state with big infrastructure, which means that bombing it from the sky will continue to have limited effect. Two months of bombing ISIS around the small town of Kobanê, and ISIS is still threatening the town!

I am a "progressive" person; I do not cling to any given status of affairs, and I try to find new possibilities even in the worst situations. On many personally and publicly difficult occasions before, I was able to find new possibilities, unexpected openings, and new ways out for life, creation, and freedom. I am trying hard to find a progressive possibility in the American war in Syria, but in vain. I am not an essentialist or a nihilist (is there any difference between the two?), but I cannot ascribe or find chances for more justice and creativity in the newest American war in my country. Our American "friends" give me the impression that they worked hard in order that not the slightest hope of a better overall situation in the country could be given to the general public in Syria. This is while giving Assad greater hopes and expectations. Really impressive!

I do not have any essentialist grudge towards the United States, but the superpower was extremely inhumane towards my country, and its present war is extremely selfish. It is quite feasible in my

opinion to conclude from American policy in Syria that Washington is radically antagonistic to democracy and the rights of the underprivileged. I suppose this means that its war in Syria is reactionary, and that it will make everything worse for the majority in the country and the region.

Nothing could diminish the despicable crime the Obama administration has committed against Syria and its population. And history will not forget this for a long time.

NP: What other demands ought Western leftists to be making on their governments regarding Syria?

YHS: To be honest, I have to admit that I do not know what leftists in the West do. I mean they are safer, they have passports, they have more opportunity to learn foreign languages, they can buy the books they want to read or at least they have access to them. So why do so many of them know nothing about Syria, feel nothing, and do almost nothing?

Again, it is not a thing they have to be making their governments do for us; it is something they have to do themselves in their countries for themselves. When they are in good shape in the United States, the UK, Germany, France, and so on, this is very good for us. They are salvaging, by standing with us in our struggle or at least by showing some understanding of our struggle, our chances to resist identity politics and victim politics in our countries. As they are now, they are only helping our local right, whether “modernist” or Islamist, by being very Western-centered and high-politics anti-imperialists.

The mainstream right is often centered on identity, supremacy, and high politics. One cannot be a leftist by only giving different answers to the same questions. Less so, by giving the same answers to different questions.