

The Left's Failure on Syria

On February 27th of this year, an article appeared by scholar and journalist Idrees Ahmad titled “Aleppo is our Guernica – and some are cheering on the Luftwaffe,” a timely analogy with the Spanish Civil War. Continuing with that analogy, we can say that we now have the counterpart of George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* in Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami’s *Burning Country*, a work that gives a voice to the Syrian revolutionaries who are the political and moral descendants of the brigades that took up arms against Franco in the name of democracy and social justice. Unfortunately, the type of solidarity that the left offered to Spain’s freedom fighters 80 years ago is sorely missing today, a result of much of the left seeing revolutionary Syrians as jihadist stereotypes refracted through an Orientalist lens rather than as flesh-and-blood human beings.



Burning Country likely got its title from the graffiti of Baathist counter-revolutionaries that warned “Bashar al-Assad or we burn the country,” a threat they made good on. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami’s book cannot help but reflect on the tragic outcome of a revolution that was forced to fight on the regime’s terms: a witch’s brew of sectarianism, violence, and reliance on outside powers that had little interest in—even antipathy toward—a successful revolution, whatever stake they had in the geopolitical chess game Syria was forced to play. Ultimately the rebels were squeezed between a regime that had much more in common with Franco than most of the left would be willing to admit and an Islamist opposition that could count on funds and weaponry from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey—states that would have used violence against any movement within their borders that had taken up the goals of the Arab Spring.

Burning Country makes abundantly clear that the left made a terrible mistake by repudiating the men and women who rose up against Assad. Some of the key figures had long and proud histories in the country's left, enduring repression and even death to defend the values that supposedly the left is committed to. One of them is Riad al-Turk, who was a leader of the Democratic People's Party that had split from the Communist Party over its support for the Baathist party. He spent 18 years in prison for his beliefs, suffering torture and solitary confinement. Interviewed by *Syria Comment* in 2005, al-Turk referred to the economic distress of the average Syrian that would only grow worse under Bashar al-Assad as the country deepened its neoliberal turn:

The issues that concern people are the issues that affect their daily lives. The average salary, for example, is less than 6,000 lire (about \$115) per month. It's not enough; they need to pay rent and put food on the table and most families have at least five people. At best, it can cover only the most modest expenses like food. With that salary, at least three people in the family have to work, but how often do you find a family with three people who can work?

Yassin al-Haj Saleh is another revolutionary fighter who refused to bow down to the Assad dynasty. A member of al-Turk's group, he spent 16 years in prison himself for refusing to toe the Baathist line. He is bitterly eloquent about the people he would have once considered his comrades but who have now turned their back on him and taken the side of Syria's tyranny:

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.

Like Idrees Ahmad and the authors of *Burning Country*, I have struggled to understand why otherwise well-meaning people could attach themselves to a ghoulish family dynasty that has gassed, barrel-bombed, and forced half the country from its homes. In some ways, it is the same political, moral, and intellectual failure that existed in Stalin's day. There is unfortunately an authoritarian streak in the left that is unleashed when confronted by a genuine revolutionary movement that challenges a state power seated on the opposite side of the geopolitical chessboard from Washington.

This was driven home to me when I attended a Syrian revolution solidarity rally in Washington in September 2012 as one of a tiny handful of American leftists. While the pro-Assad left would have bet that a keynote speaker might have been someone like John McCain or Hillary Clinton, it was instead a Berkeley professor named Hatem Bazian who was the first Palestinian ever to be elected the head of student government at San Francisco State in the late 1980s. As a student activist, he led fights for affirmative action, against apartheid in South Africa, and to stop American intervention in Central America. It was his efforts on behalf of the BDS movement that made him the target of Daniel Pipes's *Campus Watch*.

The young Syrian-Americans who organized the Washington rally are no different from those who began protesting in March of 2011, people that Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami introduce us to in the chapters "Revolution from Below" and "The Grassroots." Like the elder statesmen Riad al-Turk and Yassin al-Haj Saleh, the new generation was ready to take great risks to win their freedom. It also took considerable risks for the authors to

enter Syria and get their stories. As such, they are the genuine investigative journalists rather than a Robert Fisk who repeated regime falsehoods as a reporter embedded with the Syrian military.

One of the Syrian revolutionaries was AbdulRahman Jalloud who was arrested in one of the earliest demonstrations against the regime. He was beaten on a daily basis and frequently the victim of electric shocks administered by guards who were hopped up on methamphetamines. After several months of this treatment, he was released. Without skipping a beat, he looked up his comrades and devoted himself to the struggle once again. He told the authors: "We blocked roads with fire and ran. When they shot at us, we decided to resist. We bought 300 slingshots and distributed them to the fastest runners. We spread information to revolutionaries in other areas—how to make and throw Molotovs for example."

Jalloud was just one of the many young people who were "shocked, but not awed" as the authors put it. One young Damascene told them that Bashar al-Assad was really the leader of the revolution. "Every time he kills someone, every time he tortures, he creates ten more men to destroy him."

Eventually the people protesting in the streets in various towns and cities reached the critical mass that made it possible for them to send the Baathist cops and officials packing. In the early days of the revolution, a grass roots democracy developed that was just as deserving of the left's respect and solidarity as the Kurdish-controlled Rojova. Jalloud told the authors: "The *tanseeqiyat* were trust networks. Just five or seven full-time revolutionaries in each neighborhood, working in total secrecy, but linked up to other networks throughout the city."

The fruit of such efforts were the LCCs or Local Coordination Committees that were organized horizontally in a fashion that won many anarchists to the cause of the Syrian revolution.

Indeed, history will record that the international anarchist movement was far more capable of transcending the Orientalist prejudices that afflicted the self-described Marxist left. The LCCs rejected sectarianism and remained committed to nonviolent resistance. In October 2011 they aligned with the Syrian Non-Violence Movement, Nabd (Pulse), and the Syrian People Know Their Way to establish the Freedom Days collective that called for a "Dignity Strike" that drew the active support of workers, students, and small business owners. The LCCs documented more than 600 striking locations across ten governorates. In Damascus and Aleppo, the universities and suburbs joined in, but big business and government offices in the city center stayed open.

To give you a sense of the Orientalist tendencies of the left, *CounterPunch* has published one hundred articles on Syria but there is only one that refers to the LCCs in any detail. In an article titled "Why No Revolution Exists in Syria," Shamus Cooke disparaged the LCCs as having a "snazzy website" but little else to show for their efforts.

Notwithstanding Cooke's shallow reporting, the LCCs called general strikes on a number of occasions just as the trade unions have done in Greece but at much greater risk. In retaliation the regime carried out mass arrests and burned businesses closed in honor of the actions. During one strike a hundred shops were damaged in Deraa alone. In the two months following a strike, Assad closed 187 factories and laid off 85,000 workers, according to official figures. Apparently, many on the left are for working class militancy except when it is directed at a figure opposed to U.S. imperialism and, if allied with the Kremlin, all the better.

While most rebels raised demands limited to human rights and democracy, there were some who went even further toward a radical analysis that once again was never reported in the online and print magazines that relied on Cold War paradigms for their tilt toward Assad. One exception was Open Democracy

that published an article by Budour Hassan, a Palestinian blogger and law graduate based in occupied Jerusalem, who is cited by Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami. She told the story of the Syrian Revolutionary Youth (SRY) that promoted a program of social justice, free education, free health care, gender equality, and liberation of the occupied Golan Heights and Palestine. Because they represented true anti-imperialism and—more importantly—anti-capitalism, it was necessary for the Baathists to strangle the group in its infancy. By the end of 2013, most of the members of SRY had been imprisoned or forced into exile. At least six were tortured to death.

Based on the historical evidence, it is tempting to conclude that revolutionary struggles are Quixotic ventures doomed to fail. As a Vietnam era antiwar activist, I never would have imagined in 1975 that a reunited country under a Communist government would be presiding over an economy virtually identical to the one American imperialism tried to impose on the country. The same thing goes for Nicaragua, which under former FSLN guerrilla Daniel Ortega pins its hopes on a Chinese-funded canal that environmentalists consider a looming catastrophe for wildlife and peasants. In the late 1980s, a radical Argentine sociologist named Carlos Vilas spoke to a Brecht Forum audience in New York City about the problems that would eventually lead to Ortega being voted out of office, and that anticipated his return to power in subservience to foreign capital. He likened the revolution in Nicaragua to doctors trying to help a woman deliver a baby in a hospital operating room without electricity during a hurricane.

When new life is bursting at the seams of a womb, there is no point telling a mother to wait until conditions at a hospital become more favorable. That is also true of an embryonic new society. Syrians did not have a crystal ball in March 2011. Furthermore, once they tasted a bit of freedom as cities and towns ousted the Baathist officials and cops, there was no turning back.

Ra'ed Fares, the man who led the citizens of Kafranbel in their witty English-language slogans at weekly demonstrations, was honest enough to admit that if he had such a crystal ball, he would have chosen another path. In a 2013 visit to Kafranbel, Yassin-Kassab asked him: "If you'd known what would happen, would you have still joined the revolution?" Fares replied: "No, the price was too high. Just in Kafranbel we've had 150 martyrs. As many as that are missing; they're probably dead too."

But the revolution continues despite all attempts to kill it. When a ceasefire was called on February 29th of this year, protests broke out all across Syria, including Kafranbel where its courageous citizens held aloft a banner with these words: "Ceasefire is a ceasefire, peaceful revolution is still in progress until toppling Assad and imposing justice all over Syria."

Burning Country is a book that the pro-Assad left will likely ignore since it is an obvious threat to their most cherished fact-free beliefs. As an indication of its mastery of facts and analysis, it garnered a favorable review from *CounterPunch* contributor Ron Jacobs who describes it as "great journalism" and—like me—compares it to Orwell in an article titled "Homage to Aleppo." Since Jacobs's main interest in Syria in the past was its role in the geopolitical chess game, it is a sign of some momentum toward solidarity with people who clearly deserve it.

As another indication that the tide might be turning, Patrick Cockburn admitted to *Independent* readers that despite Assad's opposition to jihadists, there's no good reason to support him:

In Syria since the turn of the century, for instance, the rural population and the urban poor no longer enjoyed the limited benefits they had previously received under an equally harsh but more egalitarian regime. By 2011,

President Bashar al-Assad's first cousin Rami Makhlouf was reported to be a dominant player in 60 per cent of the Syrian economy and to have a personal worth of \$5 billion.

Cockburn's article was prompted by the Panama Papers revelation that Mossack Fonseca and HSBC helped Makhlouf avoid paying the taxes that might have allowed the government to assist the jobless and hungry rural poor, thereby avoiding the terrible bloodshed of the past five years. Juan Cole, another high profile commentator on Syria who has overemphasized the jihadist presence, addressed the Mossack Fonseca connection in an article on the Syrian political economy that he never published before—perhaps because it would have undermined his jihadist-threat narrative. He writes:

By 2004, Syria's per capita gross domestic product was, in nominal terms, only \$1,190 a year—half that of neighboring Jordan, a fourth that of Turkey, and a fifth that of Lebanon. Six years later, in 2010—on the eve of the outbreak of massive protests, the per capita GDP was still less than \$3000 a year (124th out of 183 countries ranked), whereas neighboring Turkey's was nearly \$11,000 (61st), according to the International Monetary Fund. That is, in 2010 Syria was similar in this regard to Honduras and the Congo, whereas Turkey was more in the neighborhood of emergent economies such as Malaysia and Brazil. By the outbreak of protests in 2011, the poverty rate in Syria had climbed to something between 11 and 30 percent, depending on how it was measured.

This was the sort of analysis that the left should have been identified with ever since March 2011. It was economic misery, not Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or Turkey, that drove people to protest and eventually take up arms.

In the early 1980s, I had long discussions with Peter Camejo, a former leader of the Socialist Workers Party, over new directions for the left. He warned about turning international

questions into a litmus test, a tendency that had fractured the Trotskyist movement for its entire history. It was also a problem for the Maoists whose quarrels over which side to support in Angola kept them from uniting over American political tasks.

Despite this having made sense to me over the decades, I find myself close to abandoning that outlook because of Syria. To some degree, it flows from my concerns over the affinity that the ultraright has with the Baathist dictatorship. As Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami point out, Nick Griffin of the far-right British National Party has visited Damascus in solidarity with Assad while members of the Greek fascist group Black Lily have fought alongside the Syrian military.

In making up my mind on the basis for left unity, I also remember another point that Camejo made. He said that the left has tended to underestimate the importance of democracy. When you take the side of a dictatorship against its own people because the USA is opposed to it, you lose track of the fundamental goal of socialism, which is to break the chains of oppression whoever is wielding them.

This is an especially complicated question when it comes to Syria since a good part of the rebel forces are opposed to the values the left has traditionally espoused. In a perfect world, the Syrian people would have lined up properly under the banner of socialism or at least democratic values.

Since this is the hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rebellion in Ireland, another Quixotic attempt to break the chains of oppression that failed to realize its goals, it is useful to remember what Lenin argued in a debate with members of the socialist left who were just as dismissive of a revolt that was susceptible to Catholic extremism just as some Syrian rebels are to Islamism:

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without

revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie *without all its prejudices*, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.—to imagine all this is to *repudiate social revolution*. So one army lines up in one place and says, "We are for socialism," and another, somewhere else and says, "We are for imperialism," and that will be a social revolution! Only those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic view would vilify the Irish rebellion by calling it a "putsch."

Louis Proyect is a long-time socialist activist who blogs at louisproyect.org and the moderator of the Marxism mailing list.