

Syria is the World: On the Failures of Leftist Internationalism

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written by Jason Schulman | August 22, 2016

“But then came Syria, and my hypocrisy and the fragility of those ideals became exposed,” wrote Palestinian activist Budour Hassan in her latest brilliant piece entitled “how the Syrian Revolution has transformed me”.



For those familiar with the situation in Syria, and in particular with the Left’s reaction to the uprising, Hassan’s open apology is a truly powerful one. The Syrian revolution exposed a lot of inconvenient facts about much of the Western and Arab Left.

There is a lot to unpack here and a single article would not do it justice. Here, I wish to address a certain aspect of the Syrian crisis, namely what ‘we’ can do to address it in our own ways. For the truth of the matter is that many of us can identify with Hassan and her initial hesitation to support the Syrian revolution.

Solidarity and support were replaced by attempts to justify the unjustifiable through the means of upholding whatever geopolitical ‘positions’ happen to suit us and prioritizing our immediate concerns rather than the concerns of those on the ground.

Two years ago, Pulse Media identified the 3 common types of ‘Leftist’ responses to the Syrian uprising and its subsequent militarisation. They are:

- Explicit support for the Assad regime
- Monochrome opposition to Western intervention, end of discussion (with either implicit or explicit neutrality on the conflict itself)
- General silence caused by deep confusion

That trend is still present today, but the recent publications of a number of books by Syrians and supporters could, one hopes, reverse the Left’s reactionary positions thus far. This includes, but is not limited to: “Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War” by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, “La Question Syrienne” by Yassin Haj Saleh, “The Crossing” by Samar Yazbek, “The morning they came for us” by Janine Di Giovanni and “Khiana: Daesh, the Left and the Unmaking of the Syrian Revolution” edited by Jules Alford and Andy Wilson.

The reason I’m listing books here is simple: the Left has, for all intents and purposes, lost the moral right to talk about Syria. It has, at best, taken the cowardly stance of ‘essentialist anti-imperialism’, defined solely in relation to their own governments rather than on the basis of a universal opposition to all forms of imperialism. It is in need of a deep re-thinking of not only Syria but of itself as well.

As Palestinian academic Lama Abu Odeh wrote: The Syrian revolution left us “digging deep inside familiar lines of thought, scrambling for things to say; rummaging inside old political bags, grappling for positions long held to hold again; milking political affiliations and precious theoretical

hometowns for whatever they're worth, but only to find us lacking in things to say; only to find us tongue-tied, stone-faced, and dumbstruck. But most importantly quiet, as quiet as the tomb made of rubble that came from a building that fell from the weight of a barrel bomb that smashed the head of a Syrian man, too poor to make his escape when he should have, that came from the city of Homs!" That silence, however justified or not, is deafening.

We have failed as a movement which pretends to follow an internationalist framework. Instead, we have adopted the isolationism of our own governments, exceeding it at times, and even armed ourselves with racist generalizations that stink of colonial disgust.

Syria exposed the fragility and superficiality of a Left that is failing to unshackle itself from the inherent contradictions of the nation state. As Yassin Haj Saleh wrote, "the movement of Syrian refugees - by sea or by foot, with many falling along the way - across the borders of hostile countries that define themselves by their past, into other countries that define themselves by a more recent past, also evokes something old. Its prototype is probably the movement of humans across continents in prehistoric times.

" Interestingly, this movement is something which can easily be understood by the average person, "despite being 'corrupted' by the nation-state, which has become a binding framework for all thought and politics" for the simple reason that it has always happened throughout history, everywhere on Earth. But the nation-state's fragility is revealed when it "stands watching, either powerless, or attempting to contain this movement that is destabilising its meaning even before it destabilises its borders." Doesn't that partially explain the hysterical reaction that Syrian refugees have often had to face once reaching Europe's 'safe' shores? This narrative of seemingly primordial hatred which, with notable exceptions, desires to demonize those seeking refuge is exposing the very lack of conviction of those professing to uphold universal values.

This should come as no surprise then that the cynicism expressed at the top level of governance is recycled down to the last activist and intellectual - again, with notable exceptions. The inherent contradictions which have plagued Syria and the world should give rise to deeper realizations, eloquently expressed by Kurdish activist Dilar Dirik in a Facebook post: "It is the capitalist-statist-nationalist-patriarchal system that forces people around the world and at the moment especially in the Middle East to chose between lesser evils in the name of freedom. Forcing millions of people to pick between ISIS or Assad; religious fundamentalism or secular militarism; monarchy, caliphate or racist nation-states; women's pornification or complete veiling; Sisi or Morsi; Atatürkism or Erdoğanism; etc are not choices but perfect weapons of breaking the people's will. To force people to settle between death by drowning or by burning is the perfect way to make them lose the most fundamental human power: hope.

The only alternatives can be outside of the two-sides-of-the-same-coin system. An internationalist, women's liberationist, grassroots democratic revolution of the people is going to make sure that in between dust and ashes and dead bodies, the communities will still be able to look each other in the eye."

Following Dirik's words, our first step should be the realization that Syria is not just a land of helpless people enduring horrible things. It is also the land of ordinary activists, teachers and rescue workers, doctors and nurses, bakers and gardeners, whether Arab, Kurdish or other, engaging in extraordinary acts of solidarity and heroism in attempts to establish alternatives to all forms of authoritarianism.

Today, there are numerous Local Councils across Syria. As Leila Al Shami explains, "the model which emerged was based on the vision of Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz, who produced a paper in

November 2011, in the eighth month of the revolution, advocating the establishment of local councils”.

With the central government largely absent for the past 4 years in so much of Syria, Syrians took the opportunity to self-organize in a direct challenge to the hegemony of the Assad dynasty. Aziz called for “autonomous, non-hierarchical self-governance and organization based on the principles of cooperation, mutual aid and solidarity” as Al Shami pointed out at a talk recently. Local councils would be “horizontal, grassroots forums where people could come together to collaborate effectively and to discuss the issues that they faced in their community, to manage their lives independently of the state and also the forum through which they could initiate social revolution, not only at the local level but also at the national and regional levels through linking up the councils”.

Such an explosion of solidarity led to unprecedented cultural and media achievements. They are not perfect, but they are extraordinary given the circumstances in which they have to function. If there's anything that can 'save' Syria from cycles of perpetual violence, it is a model which abandons a top-down imposition in favor of an inclusive bottom-up approach.

The bottom-up approach is already manifested in discussions surrounding the remarkable Rojava experiment which, while exposing the hypocrisy of selective sympathies, is worth defending for its achievements. The heroic Kobane resistance against Daesh fascists has inspired the world over and moved anarchists to join the struggle, a phenomenon which many likened to the international revolutionaries of 1930s Spain. The creation of the Autonomous Region in Afrin, Jazira and Kobane in Northern Syria/Western Kurdistan was launched in the hope of building “a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs” as the Constitution of the Rojava Cantons states. In a vision echoing that of Omar Aziz, the Rojava Charter is notable for “enshrining unity and coexistence amongst the region's diverse ethnic and religious groups, a respect for human rights and an end to gender discrimination, and affirms people's right to self determination”.

And then there are the international solidarity groups, often organized by Syrians themselves, both within and outside of Syria, that are trying their best to keep the world's attention on the every day heroes of Syria. Whether it is those saving lives in underground hospitals in Homs and East Ghouta, or those teaching future generations in underground schools in opposition-held Aleppo such as Kesh Malek, the group of 110 teachers serving around 3,000 children, or those risking their own lives to save civilians from Assad's - and Russia's - scorched Earth policy. These are the people who have asked for the world's assistance, and these are the people who have been met with a deafening silence from the Left.

Syria is the world because the world is in Syria. “The world is sick, and its sickness is aggravating our sicknesses, both inherited and acquired”, wrote Haj Saleh, and I'll end with this quote of his: “There is a crisis of the Left in the world, and the Syrian revolution has given it the opportunity to become manifest in the ugliest of ways. I believe this crisis can be traced back in part to the reality that the Left no longer occupies the position of critically examining the world system, and the question of revolution and changing the world no longer occupies its mind. The Left today is largely made up of domesticated middle-class forces, pastist in their thought and policies. It has not managed to get out of the Cold War mindset, and it finds itself completely incapable of understanding the social explosions in our internationalised region and other parts of the world.

When progress is not universal, reactionism progresses.”

Originally posted here.