

# Aleppo, the tomb of the left - Some harsh lessons for the international left

Saturday 31 December 2016, by [ALBA RICO Santiago](#), [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 21 December 2016).

## The defeat of Aleppo: Introduction

Aided by the bombs of the Russian air force and the bullets of foreign militias organized by Iran, Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad has finally managed to destroy the eastern sector of the country's largest city Aleppo, the major remaining pocket of popular resistance to his regime.

In the following article Santiago Alba Rico, a Spanish-born philosopher and writer based in Tunisia, analyzes what the defeat in Syria means for democratic and progressive opinion everywhere, and in particular the far-reaching implications of the failure of much of the international left to identify with and mobilize in support of the people of Syria in their powerful rebellion against oppression and repression. This failure, he argues, was a critical factor that facilitated the efforts of Assad and his reactionary international allies to drown the revolt in a river of blood.

Alba Rico's harsh assessment of "the left" in this article may seem caricatural to some readers; not everyone on the left is an apologist for Assad or Putin. However, the indifference of many, or their unwillingness to confront the important issues posed by the war, which I think are accurately described by Alba Rico, has given free rein to those who choose to see the conflict in Syria as little more than a rerun of a Cold War scenario of imperialism versus a Third World government.

Santiago Alba Rico is well-known in the European left for his perceptive analyses of the popular rebellions in the Middle East and North Africa during the last six years collectively identified as the "Arab Spring."

His article was first published in the Spanish online newspaper *Público* and has since been widely reproduced elsewhere. My translation from the Spanish. And a special thanks to Art Young, a long-time comrade in Toronto who is active in Palestine solidarity, for his helpful collaboration with me in working through these issues ourselves.

**Richard Fidler**

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## Aleppo, the tomb of the left

To kill on a large scale, as we know, it is necessary to lie as well as to insult and deprecate the victims. That is what the United States did in Iraq and what Israel has always done in Palestine. In 2003 the entire left shared this accusation along with ordinary decent people, and together with them the left vented its anger, and expressed its sympathy, after the bombing of Baghdad or Gaza. But it seems that whatever shocks and enrages us when it is the USA or Israel that are the

tormentors has become routine in the mindset of the left when it comes to Syria. We have accepted large-scale lying that allows the Assad regime and its occupying allies — Russia, Iran and Hezbollah — to carry out large-scale slaughter, and in doing so not only have we abandoned and deprecated the victims but we have also separated ourselves from ordinary decent people. A major part of the global left has effectively placed itself on the margin of ethics, alongside the dictators and the many imperialisms that are vanquishing the region. In a Europe where neofascism — and Islamist terrorism — are increasing rapidly, this new error, along with so many others, can cost us very dearly.

Much lying had to be done to make it possible for Assad to kill on a large scale. It meant denying that the Syrian regime was a dictatorship and even stating that it is anti-imperialist, socialist and humanist. It meant denying that there had been a very transversal, non-sectarian democratic revolution in which millions of Syrians — many of them on the left, not affiliated with any leadership or party — were participating; a sort of giant 15M [1] crystallized in Councils and Local Coordinating Committees. It meant denying the brutal repression of the demonstrations, the arrests, the torture, the disappearances. It meant denying the legitimacy of the Free Syrian Army. It meant denying the bombing with barrels of dynamite and the use of chemical weapons by the regime. It meant denying or justifying the massive bombing by Putin's Russia. It meant denying the tolerance of all of them — Assad, Russia, Iran, USA, Saudi Arabia, Turkey — toward the growth of ISIS. It meant denying the Iranian occupation of Syria. It meant denying the existence of Russian imperialism and that country's excellent relations with Israel. It meant denying the erratic indifference of the United States, which intervened only to simultaneously give a free hand to Syria and Saudi Arabia. It meant denying the arms embargo that left the rebellion in the hands of the more radical sectors, as counter-revolutionary as the regime itself. It meant denying the existence of simultaneous demonstrations against Assad and against ISIS or other jihadist militias in towns and cities that had been besieged and destroyed. It meant denying the absence of ISIS in Aleppo, from which it had been expelled by the FSA in 2014. It meant denying the suffering and terror of the people of Aleppo who were under siege. But worse, it meant denying the heroism, the sacrifice, the determination to fight of thousands of young Syrians who are like us and want what we do. And worst of all, it meant deprecating them, slandering them, insulting them, making them terrorists, mercenaries or enemies of "freedom."

Never has the left, faced with a people's revolution, behaved so ignobly. Not only has it failed to solidarize with that revolution or, once it was defeated, honour its heroes and lament the outcome, but instead it has spat in its face and celebrated its death and its defeat. Consistent with this typically imperialist (or Stalinist) denialism, it has taken its place alongside the European far right. Furthermore, it has repressed the mobilizations in our cities. And to cap it all it has criminalized the sensible left which, along with ordinary decent people has denounced the crimes of Assad and his allies while similarly denouncing the crimes of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States or — to be sure — the intolerable fascism, fully equivalent to that of the regime, of ISIS or the Al-Nusra Front.

As the communist Yassin Al Haj Saleh, for 16 years a prisoner in the regime's dungeons and one of the greatest living intellectuals, says, Syria reveals the state of the old left and registers its death. When a global democratic revolution exploded six years ago, with the "Arab world" as its epicenter, the left was not prepared either to champion it or to make the most of it, let alone understand it. Today, when the victorious counter-revolutions extend the resuscitated "Arab dictatorships" to the USA and Europe, the left has remained irrelevant as resistance and alternative. Troubled or discomfited, all of the actors have abandoned or fought against the Syrian democratic forces and all — governments, fascist organizations and communist parties — have ended up coinciding in the narrative of the "lesser evil" that condemns Syria to eternal dictatorship, the region to sectarian

violence, and Europe to endless terrorism.

This theory of the “lesser evil” (a lesser evil to the murder of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, who have been bombed, tortured, or disappeared!) has been the historical template of that regional “stability,” oppressive and deadly for the peoples, that during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century justified the West’s support to all the dictatorships in the area. After an abortive revolution, this model of the previous century now returns with redoubled ferocity, coupled with and lubricated by a sector of the left that applauds and cheers Bashar Al Assad’s “great victory”; a model that pertains so much to the last century that it can be said that some are celebrating this “great victory” as if, 25 years later and thanks to Putin, the USSR had finally won the Cold War. One thing is certain: what has also been lost this time, in Syria and Europe, and in Russia and Latin America, are democracy and justice, the only possible solutions to the authoritarianisms, imperialisms and fascisms — whether jihadist or half-European — triplet siblings that are gaining territory without resistance, that identify with each other and, accordingly, can only be defeated if they are fought simultaneously.

How are we to define these “Arab revolutions” that are now definitively dying in Aleppo with the complicity of jihadism and the complacency of the broad international alliance of right and left thrown against Syria? These revolutions were above all a revolt against the yoke of the geopolitics that had frozen, as if in amber, the inequalities and resistances in the area for at least 70 years. In a world of unequal power relationships between nation-states, geopolitics always limits any emancipatory politics of the left. That is to say, geopolitics is not of the left. If we have to take it into account in order to make minimal progress in a realistic way against the imperialist powers and in favour of sovereignty, we cannot go so far as to contradict the elemental principles associated with the universal character of any ethic of liberation: that which was once called “internationalism,” the instinct that must be recovered in a non-identitarian and democratic version.

The so-called “Arab world” (which is also Kurd, Imazighen, Berber, Toubou, etc.) is the most painful example of an entire region that is a hostage of its own oil wealth, sacrificed to the common interest of competing powers and subpowers — so-called “stability.” When the peoples of the area rebelled in 2011 in opposition to this monstrous “equilibrium,” without seeking permission from anyone, and on the margin of all inter-national interests, geopolitics ensnared them, as in a straitjacket, and the left, alongside their enemies, hastened to tie the sleeves and tighten the steel buttons.

In a context in which US hegemony is weakening, in which other powers, imperialist as well, are freeing themselves from its hegemony in order to impose their own agendas, and in which the campism of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is replaced by a hornet’s nest of counterposed reactionary interests very similar to that of the First World War — and because this time there is not a single anticapitalist or emancipatory force or project — the left, understanding nothing about the “new world disorder” or its reactionary configuration, has hastened to deliver the Syrian people, bound hand and foot, to a murderous dictator, Putin’s Russia, the ayatollahs’ Iran, and along the way the Islamic State and the Sunni theocracies of the Gulf. In other words, to what Pablo Bustinduy [2] has called “the geopolitics of disaster.” Now it is not done in the name of the “lesser evil” (Franco and Pinochet a lesser evil?). Troubled and overwhelmed by these popular intifadas that it did not understand (save for a handful of “Trotskyists” who were “Trotskyists” only because they did understand and support them), the global left reacted from the beginning in the same way as the governments and the far right, supporting the dictators. For the imperialists this has never posed any problem (“our sons of bitches” [3]) but it should have meant something to people who claim to be “on the left” but who have ended up renouncing any attempt to understand the world in tune with its ethical and political principles. Abandoning our own people on the ground, they supported the executioners and allowed them to kill on a large scale. To do this, as we said, they had to take leave of the truth and submit to the same culturalist, racist and Islamophobic clichés of the worst

European rightists.

Relying on an outdated geopolitical way of thinking that blocks any grappling with the “new world disorder,” the left has effectively abandoned its ethical principles in exchange for nothing; or, more precisely, in order to promote the return in an expanded and worsened version of the dictatorships, imperialisms and jihadisms. This great geostrategic success has been achieved at the cost of accepting a three-fold contradiction that is incompatible with the universality of the ethic of liberation and is brutally Western and Orientalist.

To accept this geostrategic yoke — otherwise illusory and unfounded — presupposes, firstly, declaring shamelessly that inhabitants of Madrid are entitled to fight an insufficiently democratic monarchy and a corrupt bipartisan system and to desire, without risking their lives, more democracy and more social justice for their country, while Syrians must on the other hand support a dictatorship that jails, tortures and assassinates them and renounce any glimmer of democracy and social justice.

To accept this false geostrategic yoke presupposes, secondly, saying as well that the imprisonment of Andrés Bódalo [4] in Spain is much more serious than that of Yassin Al Haj Saleh or Salama Keile or Samira Khalil, all of them communists, in Syria; or that the arrest of some puppeteers or the prosecution of a city councillor in Madrid is much more serious than the siege through hunger and bombing of an entire country.

To accept this false geostrategic yoke presupposes, finally, claiming in a perfectly ordinary way the right of Spanish (or Latin American) people to decide whether and when and how the “Arabs” can rebel against their dictators. The Syrians, it seems, must do what they are told from afar by a left that has exposed itself as impotent, useless and blind in its own countries. It also means experiencing as a threat, not as a hope, the democratic will and social struggles of other peoples: those fighting in more difficult conditions for the same things as we do become not comrades but enemies, not valiant partners with whom we must express our solidarity but “terrorist” criminals, the term that we have rightly denounced or downplayed when it is used by our judges or our “imperialist” governments.

In short, a large part of the Arab, European and Latin American left has sacrificed internationalism to a geostrategic order in which the peoples and their democratic struggles no longer have any friends and in which this left, irrelevant and in retreat now throughout the world, has let the regimes against which the “Arabs” rose up in 2011 advance without resistance. We have understood nothing, we have done nothing to help, we have handed over to the enemy all our weapons, including conscience. After Syria democracy is retreating everywhere. Aleppo is indeed the tomb of the Syrians’ dreams of freedom, but it is also the tomb of the global left. Just when we need it most.

**Santiago Alba Rico**

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**P.S.**

\* <http://lifeonleft.blogspot.fr/2016/12/the-defeat-of-aleppo-some-harsh-lessons.html>

\* Original version from Publico:

<http://ctxt.es/es/20161214/Firmas/10137/santiago-alba-rico-alepo-eeuu-israel-Putin-geopolitica.htm>

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## Footnotes

[1] The anti-austerity movement in Spain began with massive demonstrations and occupations on May 15, 2011, now known colloquially as 15M, inspired in part by the social uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt at that time.

[2] Pablo Bustinduy is a Podemos member of Madrid's City Council and works with the party's delegation in the European Parliament.

[3] Franklin Roosevelt is reported to have referred to Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza as "a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch."

[4] Andrés Bódalo is a well-known trade unionist and former Podemos candidate in Jaén, Andalusia, who was convicted of an "offence to authority" and sentenced to three years and six months imprisonment for allegedly assaulting a Social Democratic City Council member who had pushed his way through a mass workers' demonstration outside the City Hall:

<http://www.indultobodalo.info>

Many observers say Bódalo was actually attempting to maintain order among the demonstrators.