

Europe: Our Wounds Are Bridges

Friday 22 April 2022, by [Al-HAJJ SALEH Yassin](#), [BILOUS Taras](#), [Elia J. Ayoub / AYOUB Joey](#), [MUÑOZ Sebastian Ordoñez](#), [WAFA Mustafa](#), [YURCHENKO Yuliya](#) (Date first published: 15 April 2022).

The following was transcribed from a multilingual online encounter of the [Post-Extractive Futures](#) series, co-produced by [War on Want](#), [Tipping Point UK](#), [JunteGente](#), and [The Fire These Times](#) project. Printed with permission and encouragement to make this precious information freely available: please reference, republish, and share. This version has been edited for space and readability. Complete transcript available as a PDF, linked at the end.

Watch the whole two-hour conversation:

Joey Ayoub: I am going to start by introducing our four guests—we have two Syrians and two Ukrainians. I would ask speakers to speak as slowly as they can to give time for our interpreters. The team has done an amazing job getting five different languages at the same time: English, Ukrainian, Russian, Spanish, and Arabic. I have no idea how they managed to do this, but they did.

Yassin al Haj Saleh, who will be speaking in English, is a Syrian writer and former political prisoner. He is author of several books on Syria, prison, contemporary Islam, intellectual responsibility, and experiences of the atrocious. He is the husband of Samira al Khalil, who was abducted by an armed Islamist group in Douma in December 2013. He now lives in Berlin.

Wafa Mustafa, who will also be speaking in English, is a Syrian activist, a journalist, a survivor of detention. Mustafa comes from Masyaf, a city in the Hama governorate in western Syria. She left the country on 9 July 2013, exactly a week after her father was forcibly disappeared by the regime in Damascus. In her advocacy, Mustafa covers the impact of detention on young girls, women, and families.

Yuliya Yurchenko, who will also be speaking in English, is a senior lecturer in political economy at the department of economics and international business and a researcher at the political economy, governance, finance, and accountability institute at the University of Greenwich, UK. She is the author of [Ukraine and the Empire of Capital](#), which was published by Pluto Press in 2017. She researches state, capital, and society relations as well as public services as a commons with a regional focus on Europe and Ukraine.

Taras Bilous, who will be speaking in Ukrainian, is a Ukrainian historian and an activist of the Social Movement Organization. As an editor of for [Commons](#) a journal of social critique, he covers the topics of war and nationalism. He has recently written quite a lot of articles, including "[A Letter to the Western Left from Kiev](#)" as well as "[The Left in the West Must Rethink](#)."

We'll start with Syrians and then go to Ukrainians—I will ask Yassin first, if that's okay, and then Wafa: can you talk to us about what's been happening in Syria? Feel free to start where you want to start, I know this is a big question.

"The idea of dignity looms very large in the Syrian struggle."

Yassin al Haj Saleh: Thank you Joey, thank you everybody for organizing this amazing event. It is really vital now that we can meet and talk about issues, to reflect and find connections between our struggles in different parts of the world. I feel a bit prehistoric here, because I see most of the people here are thirties or younger, so I feel quite a grandpa. But maybe I have the merit of having been involved in struggles in Syria for democracy, social justice, and human dignity for quite a long time.

When I was very young, I was a political prisoner—for all my twenties and more than half of my thirties. It was the first wave of struggle for democracy and change. Our struggle for retrieving our country did not start today or eleven years ago: it started in the second half of the 1970s, after Hafez al Assad came to power. We have now a dynasty: he ruled the country for thirty years, and then his son ruled the country for twenty.

The second wave—an even bigger wave—started in 2011. It started as a peaceful demonstration of people in many parts of the country for democracy, justice, and dignity. The idea of dignity loomed very large in the Syrian struggle. It was faced by war from the very first moment, from the side of the regime. People were arrested, tortured, and killed at demonstrations. Just a few days after the beginning, there was a sit-in in Dera'a and dozens of demonstrators were killed—not by police, but by military formations led by Maher al Assad, the brother of Bashar al Assad.

For almost two years, it was a Syrian-versus-Syrian struggle. It was our struggle against a cliquish, oligarchic, and extremely brutal regime. Then the national siting of struggle collapsed and it became a regional thing, with many regional and international powers involved. I'll try just to give some outlines. After the collapse of the Syrian-versus-Syrian struggle, there were many regional and international powers, and there were many massacres with WMD, especially chemical weapons. There was a big chemical massacre in one of the suburbs around Damascus on August 21, 2013—more than 1,400 people were killed. At the same time there was the rise of nihilistic Islamic groups—I call them nihilistic because they negate, truly, the Syrian society itself. Most of their struggle was against Syrians who were fighting the regime.

The Americans intervened in Syria in 2014. The Russians intervened a year later, in 2015. The Turks a year later, 2016. Iranians were intervening from the very beginning, through their satellites from Lebanon and Iraq and Afghanistan, and sectarianizing the struggle: manipulating the cultural-religious divisions within Syrian society. Israel was intervening all the time, and occupies Syrian territory since 1967, the Golan Heights. I don't think we have many examples that are similar to Syria, with five regional and international powers in one country, and many substate actors—I mentioned Lebanese Hezbollah, many Shi'a groups from Iraq and Afghanistan, and Pakistan; and the infiltration of Sunni jihadism. So it is a global thing.

At the same time, almost seven million Syrians have been displaced outside the country, which is thirty percent of the population. So we have the world in Syria, so to speak, and we have Syrians scattered in 127 countries: mostly in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Germany. Then Iraq and Egypt.

Now we have five Syrias. One is dominated by the regime: the Assadi protectorate, protected by Russia and Iran. Then there is an enclave in Idlib, dominated by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which is sort of an offshoot of Al Qaeda. Then a strip along the northern borders of Syria occupied by Turkey (though through Syrian proxies). Then there is a region in the east dominated by the Americans; the boots on the ground are mostly Kurdish, from Syria and from neighboring countries (Turkey, specifically). Then of course the Golan Heights. So we have five Syrias and we have Syrians everywhere in the world. I don't think we know many examples like this.

The human toll was huge. A few months ago, a speaker at the UN said 350,000 people were killed,

and she emphasized that the real number is most likely far bigger. My personal estimation is between half a million and 600,000—which is more than one among every forty Syrians. We have more than 100,000 people forcibly disappeared. We don't know their fates. Wafa's father is one of them; my wife, my brother, and many of my friends are among them.

So it is a big tragedy on a human level, reducing a whole country to a situation that we don't know how to understand and analyze well. Many people say it is complicated in Syria—and this is true. But it is analyzable, and the main thing in analyzing it is to talk about the complicators. When there is a big chemical massacre, and instead of punishing the criminal there is a farcical application of international law—then things will become really complex.

“I am physically here, but I am mentally and emotionally still in Syria.”

Wafa Mustafa: As Yassin mentioned, first and foremost, there have been many estimates from different entities regarding the numbers of deaths, detainees, and those forcibly disappeared. We have heard many numbers, reaching a million victims killed in Syria. This is the most difficult aspect of the the tragedy in Syria: nobody actually knows and nobody actually can tell. After eleven years, it is very difficult for any organization or entity to come up with the real numbers.

We know, as Yassin said, that more than half of Syria's population has fled their homes. Seven million people are internally displaced. Two million of them are staying in camps with limited access to basic services. Fourteen million Syrians inside Syria are in need of some humanitarian assistance (this is according to the UN) and about five million are classified as in extreme and catastrophic need. More than twelve million are struggling to find enough food each day.

I usually do not really speak numbers—we all don't really like numbers. But these numbers are huge. Each of us still have family in Syria. When I say more than twelve million people are struggling to find enough food, I know that because my family is one of those families. My friends and people who I grew up with call me sometimes to say, “We are very embarrassed, but can you please support because we spent the last week with no food.” It is unfortunately the reality.

Education became a kind of luxury in Syria, not only because a huge number of schools were targeted (not only randomly—targeted) and destroyed by the regime and Russian airstrikes, but also because many families did not send their children to school for years, for the sake of their safety. Whole cities are destroyed in Syria. Aleppo is a very clear example, unfortunately very similar to what we are seeing in Ukraine. And it's heartbreaking talking about the hospitals. According to Physicians for Human Rights, only half of Syria's healthcare facilities are functioning.

I've been living in Germany for now six years, but my daily reality is Syria, and is about Syria. This is something many people in exile say: I am physically here, but I am mentally and emotionally still in Syria. Not only because this is the country that I belong to and fought for, but also because my father is still there, somewhere. My father has been forcibly disappeared by the Assad regime now for 3,208 days. That makes eight years, nine months, and twelve days. We don't know if he is alive or not. This is what enforced disappearance means in Syria: no phonecalls, no letters, no communication. Families like mine are tortured by the regime by spending the rest of their lives wondering if their loved ones are alive or not, and if they are not, why they were killed? And where are they buried?

The footage from Ukraine—everything we've been seeing is just heartbreaking. To be honest I'm disappointed, because I did not wish that to happen to anyone else. I wish that the world didn't let us down, but they did. I'm here today and I'm very honored, but for some reason I feel ashamed—I should not be, because I am not the international community, I did not fail anyone, and I am fighting

with all my power. But I still feel ashamed. Just before this conversation I was looking at images and footage and videos from Ukraine and I just feel helpless. I hope this conversation today will inform all of us and will also bring us closer.

JA: Thank you Wafa. I know I speak for everyone when I say you are not the one who should be ashamed in such a context. Both Yassin and Wafa, thanks a lot. It's impossible to summarize and explain the past fifty years in a few minutes.

We can move on to Yuliya, to focus on recent and ongoing events in Ukraine. Can you also give us some context for what is happening in Ukraine? Then we'll go to Taras.

"There is so much more to this story. Where are the people? Where is their agency, their subjectivity? Where are their stories? Where are their desires, where are their dreams? Where are their lives?"

Yuliya Yurchenko: Thank you very much. I like to follow after others have spoken because you can layer on what others have said. In a sense that is also true here, but at the same time it is more difficult, because you hear these heartbreaking stories—of course you know it from the news and you hear personal accounts, but there is something quite different happening to you, even in a virtual space, with people who have endured it personally. My heart goes out to you and your families in your country. Years of suffering, absolutely horrific.

I am glad we are having this event of support and solidarity with our friends and comrades from Syria, because we see so many horrifying similarities in what is going on in Ukraine. You see the betrayal of those who you hope to find among your comrades in these difficult times. We talk about it a lot: horrendous suffering of people, destruction of cities, kidnappings, torture, murder—and on top of dealing with all that, when you're trying to find some support for humanitarian and military needs of the country that are so dire, you also have to fight those who doubt what is going on in your country. I'm not just talking about Kremlin propaganda; I'm talking about the people who call themselves the hardcore Western left or whatever they are.

I find that to be one of the most difficult things, because it makes you feel very lonely and very sad. If you do not support the liberation struggle of those who are being aggressively destroyed, then what's happening? We hear a lot that it's an inter-imperialist struggle, that this is all a great power struggle and our land and our people are just a pawn. Yes, that's blatantly obvious. But there is so much more to this story. Where are the individuals? Where is their agency, their subjectivity? Where are their stories? Where are their desires, where are their dreams? Where are their lives?

What has to die inside of you to look at images of burned and mutilated bodies and say that it has all been staged, this is a cinema production to justify some fascist regime in Ukraine? On a personal level, that is the most difficult thing to deal with. I do not wish that on anybody, and I know that you've gone through that yourself and you still go through that. The disbelief of eyewitness stories—what kind of interest does a person whose house has been bombed have in framing somebody else? I cannot believe this is what we're dealing with. There is a lot of litter that we need to get out of the international discourse altogether.

We have been hearing a lot about the inter-imperialist context. If we are to have a left analysis of what is going on, we need to be looking at people, social groups, and classes. We need to be asking ourselves: Where is the labor? Where are the capitalist interests? How are certain narratives being manipulated, and who is benefiting from it? It's not about looking for conspiracies, but to understand what is going on and who we need to be supporting. We also have to go back to the roots of what left solidarity is supposed to be. We need to study the material, see who is on the ground fighting for

their self preservation, and who is fighting to exceed their financial or territorial interests.

Of course there are competing imperialist powers, but we live now in a world that is taken by the empire of capital, where there are different powers—not so much powers, but classes by proxy of different states and armies—fighting for spheres of interest, as Russians like to call them. There are fewer and fewer options for an alternative world order or alternative politics for any groups that are trying to challenge that, and any time you try to break away, you get labeled as some sort of opportunist. That is quite toxic.

Of course there are certain class interests of various fractions of capital who will try to manipulate certain groups and voting behaviors and the rest of it, but it doesn't negate the individual interest and agency of people who end up being exploited in the process. Centering that is very important for everybody.

We've heard a lot of legitimizing narratives coming from Russia, that they have security concerns as a pretext for their latest invasion. Of course it's pure fabrication, but it has been in the making for some time; it didn't come from nowhere. There is no evidence that Ukraine was going to invade Russia; it's a complete fabrication. It doesn't make any sense. Instead, Russia kept amassing troops on Ukraine's border for years—especially since Zelenskyy became president, because Putin saw him as weak and Zelenskyy naively thought negotiations might get somewhere. But Putin only recognizes hard power. For those who have that power, he may negotiate—but that also is not guaranteed, as we can see now with these antagonizing gestures toward NATO, France, the United States, and the rest of it.

Russia invaded Ukraine eight years ago; we are in year nine now. But it had been infiltrating the local population and sending sleeper agents in preparation for Russkiy Mir and the Novorossiya project for years before that. Russian TV propaganda channels and political technologists have been fabricating this narrative that negates Ukraine's national, linguistic, and cultural identity as separate from Russia, for decades. Russia may have some concerns, as they do say, but those are about losing control over and access to Ukraine's economy and the Black Sea deep water ports at Simferopol and Sevastopol, as they said in 2014. But those are imperialistic concerns, not security concerns. Having negotiations around that is completely ridiculous.

The mask of pretend concerns and diplomacy and brotherhood has slipped altogether. There's been an evolution of this narrative of 'freeing' Russian-speakers from supposed 'Nazis' who staged a 'coup' in Ukraine in 2014 and built some sort of 'anti-Russian Banderite regime,' which is again a complete fabrication. Yes of course there are some rightwing elements in the country, that's undeniable. But to say that Ukraine is overrun by far-right parties—well, let's look at the French election a few days ago. Imagine if an equivalent of Le Pen's party gathered as many votes as it did, in Ukraine. Rightwing parties have never had nearly that level of success in Ukraine. Electorally speaking, they lost support of the population after the first invasion.

These are contradictory narratives. There is also no such thing as 'pure' protest, pure revolutions—everybody agrees, everybody carries the red banner and we're building communism, and that's the only revolution we can support. It's never happened, and I doubt it ever will. That kind of ridiculous, non sequitur naivety of some on the left, internationally, really baffles me. We hear narratives about denying Ukrainians weapons to defend their country from Russian aggression, on the basis that Azov battalion is in Mariupol—what do people in Bucha do, or in Sumy, or in Kharkhiv? Do they deserve to be annihilated because there are some nasty people in the country?

“The fact that people who are in such a dire situation are expressing their solidarity with us is probably what matters the most.”

In terms of building international solidarity, we need to be doing the very difficult work of tackling these nonsensical narratives. There's more to the story than that. You cannot use your anti-American and anti-NATO sentiments to justify denying weapons to Ukrainians to defend themselves, or Syrians for that matter. It doesn't make sense. There were a couple of cases of trade unionists in Greece and Italy refusing to load weapons that were directed to Ukraine, and it was paraded as some sort of heroic deed because they were risking their jobs. You know what? Keep your jobs. We don't need solidarity like that.

Last Saturday, there was a demo organized by Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, which I am a part of, and I am also a part of Sotsialny Rukh together with Taras. There was a demo in London with the support of the biggest unions in the country, supported by Sotsialny Rukh from Ukraine, and supported by the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine—all the texts and the slogans were agreed. And the attacks that we saw from so-called leftists on social media and in their own publications have been absolutely outrageous. These workers don't have the ideas you would like them to have so you will not defend them? It really is quite something else.

In terms of healing and going forward, we need to be building solidarities through listening to each other and allowing those who are fighting to tell their story, not projecting some hundred-year-old templates of what things are supposed to look like. Do what historical materialists are supposed to do: study the material and then develop your bloody theory! Do not go with your theory book where you don't even speak the language and you've never stepped your foot before.

Amplifying the voices of those who are in the middle of the fight, those who have suffered; asking people what life they want to live and then helping them to build it: this is what we need to be doing together. Be careful with each other. Be mindful of each other's trauma and suffering. Listen. Sometimes we will overstep certain boundaries, apologize, and ask how to take it further ahead. This is the kind of left, the kind of solidarity that we need to be building. Only then will we have a fighting chance at tackling this hydra of capitalist interests that are ripping apart our world in their greed, destroying our planet, our societies, our families, our gardens and our homes, just so that a few more bucks can be made.

Let's build those. I'm really happy that we're making these connections today. Thank you so much for inviting me and for listening.

Taras Bilous: Good evening. I'd like to thank the organizers for inviting me here, and I would like to thank the interpreters, now they will have to do double interpretation into English and into other languages. It's hard for me to wrap my head around how it works! I would also like to express gratitude to all Syrians who have expressed their support over this one and a half months of war. Many people supported Ukraine globally. There were huge rallies. But the fact that people who are in such a dire situation are also expressing their solidarity with us probably is what matters the most. I was preparing to say one thing, but now I'm not sure anymore.

As Yassin and Wafa spoke more about historical context, I would like to add that yes, our stories are similar to a certain extent. In our case, it all started with the Maidan revolution in 2014, which was also a part of this wave of mass protests across the world: the Arab Spring, the Syrian revolution—but we probably were luckier, because the Maidan won, and unlike in the Syrian revolution, the Yanukovich regime was overthrown. But right after this we were faced with Russian aggression. I remember we were afraid that Russian tanks will approach Kyiv. Thank god, back then Russia only annexed Crimea and invaded Donbas—it invaded the most pro-Russian regions of Ukraine.

This is a topic for a separate conversation. Probably Ukraine is not as diverse as Syria, but since the

day it gained its independence it was polarized. There were pro-Russian citizens and and pro-Western citizens and forces in the country. Ukrainians are very often not happy with how this is presented in Western media: that there is a conflict between Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers or something like that. In reality it is way more complex; it was never an ethnic conflict. It's difficult to describe this conflict and this original division in the country. But yes, we had this reality.

Then, eight years ago, Russia annexed Crimea, the only region in Ukraine where Russians formed the majority—but also, back in the day, the Russian empire of the eighteenth century invaded it. The Crimean Tatars, who had been indigenous people there, were pushed out of that region for centuries, and Russia tried to bring more Russians to Crimea. And then the war in Donbas started.

The final thing I'd like to add is this: there is a saying that all commanders are preparing for past wars. When this war started, I realized that this also has to do with me, even though I am just an activist and an editor. Eight years ago we were afraid that Russian tanks would come to Kyiv, but it didn't happen back then. After that, I never would have thought that Russia, so easily, without *causus belli*, would invade Ukraine. Eight years ago it was happening in the context of a political crisis in Ukraine, when the society was polarized, and Russia used this. Throughout all these years we saw the horror in Syria; there were periods when I was afraid it would also happen to us. But I also thought that a large-scale war is only possible if there is some serious political crisis in Ukraine; if there is a third Maidan revolution (many people were talking about that), Russia would use that. But I was very wrong.

When Western media started talking about large-scale invasion, I thought this was a nonsensical idea. A large-scale invasion would be a disaster! Putin is not that stupid, to do that! It appeared that it was the other way around. We didn't understand Putin's regime well enough, and what he is ready to do.

JA: Thanks, Taras. This is a good segue, actually, because the followup question was going to be about the the links between Syrians and Ukrainians. The occupation and annexation of Crimea happened one year before the Russian intervention and invasion in Syria, and since then we've seen similar tactics being deployed in both Ukraine and Syria: the bombing of hospitals, the using of humanitarian corridors as places to bomb, the online disinformation (using in some cases the exact same template that was used in Syria).

For the Syrians here, what were your thoughts in the first few days of the second Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February? And to the Ukrainians, maybe since then or even before then, how did you view the situation in Syria?

“In Syria, the US has always been another Russia. The Russian intervention in Syria has never been condemned by the US, or any European power for that matter.”

YHS: First of all, we have the same enemy, Russia, as an occupation power in Syria since late September 2015. 23,000 Syrian civilians have been killed by Russian bombardment in Syria. Russia used cluster bombs, thermobaric munitions, and phosphorous bombs against Aleppo and many areas in Syria. Everything that we see now in Ukraine has been seen before in Syria. Markets and hospitals were targeted systematically, after Russia got location information from the UN. And then there is this courageous, valiant ability to lie. What amazes me more than anything is they are very powerful at lying, and trying to convince the whole world of their lies: that chemical weapons were never used in Syria, and there were no civilian victims, and of course everyone is a terrorist in Syria—the way everyone is a Nazi in Ukraine. So Ukrainians are killing their people in Bucha and Mariupol, as we were doing this in Syria all the time.

Apart from the fact of the same enemy and the same tactics, there is a sense that the cause is one. In Syria it was a popular uprising for political change: for democracy, for justice. We were not delusional about the difficulties that we would face if we were able to overthrow the regime—we were not able. But we were not delusional that things would be easy for us after more than forty years of Assad family rule, almost half a century of Ba'athist rule of our country. In Ukraine, they have an elected government. So it is that in Syria, the Russians are protecting a regime that is similar to the regime they have in Russia. In Ukraine, they are angry about the democratically elected government and that Ukrainians are representing themselves. So it is crushing democracy in Ukraine, and it is preventing democracy in Syria.

Of course, we have a monstrous and traitorous regime that made this possible in Syria. Assad started killing his people and then invited foreign powers to this murder feast. This is not a very optimistic observation: this whole thing is no longer about democracy. We lost our first independence—independence from colonialism was lost because we failed to implement our second independence, which is independence from tyranny, which is democracy. We see it clearly. Now Syria is divided and occupied. In Syria it is again a question of liberation and self-determination.

Many people misunderstand this—and many leftists, as Yuliya talked about so bitterly. I understand your bitterness, Yuliya, I am quite bitter. But I don't think we have to spend much energy or much time on this—I have done; I have dedicated time to these issues. But what they don't understand is that this state, under the name of War on Terror, became a continuation of colonialism by other means. It is a colonial state. Which means, again, that it is a question of national liberation. It is again self-determination. It is not only democracy. First we need to retrieve our country from imperialist powers, and Russia is one—it is a shame that we have to talk about this.

The main difference, however, between Syria and Ukraine is that in Ukraine, the US is on the opposite side of Russia. They are not fighting the Russians, they are against a no-fly zone, they will not give Ukraine warplanes—but they are against Putin, and in a way they are helping. In Syria, the US has always been another Russia. The Russian intervention in Syria has never been condemned by the US, or any European power for that matter. This is another source of complexity in Syria. Democratic powers have never been democratic in the least, in Syria or in the Middle East in general.

This is a long story—a long, ugly, nasty, and unspeakable one, and I will not elaborate on it. But it is a point that people should keep in their minds. In Syria we have two Russias. One of them is called the United States of America. As if one Russia isn't too much for us! There are other powers and they are not helping the Syrian people: the Iranians are another occupation power; and the Israelis, and the Turks (though they are using Syrian proxies).

“By design, there is very little space for any salvation of any people who have been systematically held out of positions of power—on the level of race, on the level of sex and gender, on the level of religion, ethnicity. The colonial and imperialistic legacy of the world has not really gone anywhere.”

YY: I agree that the War on Terror is neocolonial: the spread of democracy through bombing by the United States. There have been so many violations of international law by Israel, the United States, France, and the UK that when Putin started breaking the facade of the international illiberal “liberal” order, they couldn't really say anything, could they? He could sit at the security council of the UN with a smirk on his face and say, “We're not doing anything you haven't done.” And he was right.

It's not to justify what Russia was doing. But this order has been dysfunctional for a very long time,

and it has been reproducing hierarchies in the international order since its establishment—and it does so by design. Watching Syria in horror, and when the Putin regime started doing what it's doing in Ukraine, to me it looks like the facade of this liberal international world order and geopolitics—the facade of international law functioning, the facade of neoliberalism, the facade of some sort of rule-based order—is weakening. There are a lot of contradictions in the way international politics have been conducted. This self-appointed spreader of democracy, the United States, has been the biggest bully on the block, abusing the system for a very long time. It was only a matter of time until someone came up and started mimicking these things, and started exploiting certain tropes in this so-called order, like “sanctity of elections.”

In the nation-state system, the monopoly on the use of violence by the state has been systematically instrumentalized to legitimize the existence of despotic regimes who have usurped power. When there are popular uprisings against them, then those protesters are breaking the law, and they're terrorists, and they're labeled with all sorts of unsavory names. Somehow only certain groups have the right to determine what and how things should be decided in their countries, and it has to be done through elections, and there is a sanctity to that. No matter what kind of treacherous group of people get into power, or how they change their politics from what they said they were going to do, or however fraudulent the elections were, nobody is supposed to challenge that.

There are a hell of a lot of flaws in that system. Because this so-called order is held as sanctified, then by design there is very little space for any salvation of any people who have been systematically held out of positions of power—on the level of race, on the level of sex and gender, on the level of religion, ethnicity. The colonial and imperialistic legacy of the world has not really gone anywhere. It's become a little more dressed up with a few more frills.

To me, the explosion of all these contradictions, bared in the international system—the facade of democracy and freedom is slipping, and it becomes more and more impossible every day to pretend the system is functioning. This is the hope: in the myriad international conflicts, there is a hope that with every next one it becomes more difficult to pretend that the system can actually serve its purpose. Hopefully some sort of challenge to it can materialize into something qualitatively different. That hope is still there.

TB: I have to admit I don't know that much about Syria, and from what I've seen from the way the Western media have been reporting on the Ukrainian situation over the last eight years, and the war in the Donbas specifically—this has taught me to be very careful when speaking about conflicts in other countries. The things I've seen written by Western journalists who are not aware of the Ukrainian context have been very difficult for me to read and comprehend, so I take with a pinch of salt anything I'm seeing and reading about Syria as well.

It's difficult for me to draw comparisons because I am not that aware of all the details, but if I make an attempt at the comparison: the Maidan in Ukraine and the Syrian revolution were part of the same wave of popular uprisings around the world. The task here was in many ways simpler than that faced by Syrians. In Syria, the authoritarian regime had existed for decades by then. The Assad family had privatized the country and turned it into their own dominion. In Ukraine, the authoritarian regime was only making an attempt to establish itself, and Yanukovich failed. We managed to topple the authoritarian regime as it was only forming, as it was just finding its feet.

In a way, the lesson of Syria for us is that we get a glimpse of what might have happened had we not been successful—had Yanukovich not been toppled, not fled; had Russia overtly supported him as they have with Assad, had they attempted to restore him to power. It's a lesson to us. Many people in Ukraine after the Maidan in 2014 were disappointed with its achievements. Some of the aspirations that people had as they went out into the streets, as they fought against the Yanukovich

regime—many of those aspirations, they felt, had been betrayed and never came to fruition. But I think the comparisons should be drawn not to what we had before the revolution, but with potential scenarios of what could have been. And we don't even need to turn to Syria. We have the example of Belarus next door. A totalitarian regime with Russian support has just suppressed a popular uprising there. Thankfully we have not faced a similar outcome.

“The left does not have to support American imperialism in order to support arms delivery to Ukraine or demand the strengthening of sanctions. These are things that go in parallel, and the progressive community should be supporting these things.”

Yassin has mentioned that Russia in its propaganda, both in Syria and in Ukraine, was using similar templates and similar approaches, drawing all Syrians as terrorists and all Ukrainians as Nazis. But on the other hand, in both cases in these popular uprisings, forces that we perhaps aren't happy about have also participated. Ukraine does have its far-right, and Syria does have its jihadists. But the thing we need to be aware of is how Russia always pounces on the opportunity to magnify them and say that everyone is a far-right group. As soon as you have one unsavory participant, everyone will be drawn as them.

I also wanted to react to Yassin's comments about Russia and the US. Yes, you are absolutely right, the situation is different. For many decades, Ukraine has been between Russian and American colonialism and imperialism. I want to turn to a specific incident about a week after the full scale invasion broke out. I was in Kyiv and I was contacted by a Western left journalist and he suggested that we catch up for an interview, and I was very interested in meeting him. I thought if a person arrives to Kyiv amid the current situation—back then, the situation was very tense in Kyiv. I was very eager to meet this person. But the journalist turned out a complete idiot. He arrived in Kyiv and started telling me that the US was the biggest threat to us whereas Russia—they're moderate imperialists, they're manageable.

Yuliya mentioned that there are many flaws in the current liberal international system. But we also have to see what is happening in Russia right now. For many years they have had an authoritarian regime, and after the onset of the war—and after the antiwar movement has been entirely suppressed—they are approaching living under fascism, effectively. Putin is referring to the examples of Iraq and so on in order to justify his invasion in Ukraine. But I honestly don't remember American journalists during the war in Iraq writing articles about how the Iraqis need to be de-Iraqified (I'm not even sure of the word here!) in order to justify a complete genocide of the Iraqi people. Russian journalists, I am afraid, are writing these things.

So as I was writing the letter to the Western left—this is on the second day of the war—I hadn't processed everything through the prism of what's happening. Back then I thought there was one clear imperialist enemy: Russia. Don't get me wrong, the US invasion of Iraq is a crime, and there should have been tribunals; people should have faced justice. But we then need to continue the conversation all the way to French and British colonialism after the Second World War—perhaps we should not have supported British and French colonialism in order to support the war of the Allies against Nazi Germany. Similarly, the left does not have to support American imperialism in order to support arms delivery to Ukraine or demand the strengthening of sanctions. These are things that go in parallel, and the progressive community should be supporting these things.

The international tribunal that we would like to have Putin and Russian war criminals facing—probably the US, Britain, and France will be reluctant to support the establishment of such a tribunal because it could be used as a template also to prosecute them for things they have done. We have seen Russia wielding its veto power in the UN security council, and I'm quite sure the US will be reluctant to change this system because the US also uses its veto power and it wants to hang on

to its privileged position.

So yes, we are now in a position where the international 'rule-based order' is facing its largest crisis in decades. But I also feel that now we have a proper chance to reform the UN, for example, to actually do something about the veto powers in the security council. For this we need international pressure. A bright example is that for the first time in forty years, since Russia's invasion in Ukraine, the UN resolution "Unity for Peace" was actually enforced and the issue of Ukraine was moved from the security council to the general assembly. If my understanding is correct, the Syrian opposition has been struggling for this to happen for many years, and has been unsuccessful. So Ukraine has been privileged and lucky.

This is a great opportunity. This is a great moment when we need to exert pressure on Western governments for them to do what is needed and what is right.

Not stopping Russia in 2015, and not stopping the Assad regime, sent a clear message to Putin and all dictatorships all over the planet: please do whatever you want, bomb your own citizens, use chemical weapons against them, kill them, detain them, besiege them, it's fine.

WM: I didn't know very much about Ukraine before I left Syria. Two years ago during the pandemic I watched *Winter on Fire*, the documentary about the revolution in the Maidan in 2014. Especially after the revolution, especially after I fled, I am interested in films and I watched many things about similar fights for freedom and liberation movements, and that was one of the most intense, relevant, powerful and touching things I've ever seen. The main point was that it's very similar to what I know. They are speaking a different language, they are in a different geography, but it feels so similar. The boy who said, "I never went to school but now the Maidan is my school." The activist who was one of the first activists to be shot in the Maidan, and the collective sadness, the collective grief over this activist, the way people organized themselves in the Maidan—this is not something I take for granted, not something I see in a film and then just forget about. It stayed with me.

Because I watched this film, and I learned a little bit more about Ukraine, and I saw their fight, their longing for freedom, their power, their strength, their sacrifices—that made it more difficult for me now when the invasion started. Because to me it felt like a place that I know. Immediately it came to mind all the places and faces I saw in that film. At one point while watching that, as Taras said, I was very happy that it's not like Syria. It gave me hope. I was even more hopeful that yes, one day we might go back to Syria, we might take over squares and Maidans again, and we might also achieve what Ukraine achieved. This made it more difficult for me now when the invasion started. It made me feel that I'm losing hope on Syria.

I felt that we were pushing Syria's case forward. I thought that with the support of other people we would move it a step forward. In the past few years, as activists we've been talking about the danger of normalizing the Assad regime, the danger of letting Assad get away with his crimes, the danger of not stopping Russia. It's very sad, we always said that it's not only about Syrians: *You don't care, you thought Syria is very far, you thought Syrians are uncivilized, you don't care about them? Well, they are here now, they live in Europe, they live in your country. They are here and they are loud. And they don't stop, and they are not keeping silent.*

But unfortunately politicians and governments did not know that not stopping Russia in 2015, and not stopping the Assad regime, sent a clear message to Putin and all dictatorships all over the planet: please do whatever you want, bomb your own citizens, use chemical weapons against them, kill them, detain them, besiege them, it's fine. You will just be called a president, you will be welcomed. Sometimes we will just release a statement saying that we don't accept that, and this is

not fine, and you are violating human rights, and we will take actual steps. Eleven years after that, we're still just seeing raised eyebrows and empty statements, empty words, and nothing has changed.

This makes me even more angry, unfortunately. But this is why I am more determined now. I believe that our fights are connected, all over the planet. People tell me this is a very romantic idea of fighting for freedom. Unfortunately, Ukraine proved it is not romantic: it is practical and realistic. We would not have seen what is happening in Ukraine today if Russia was stopped a few years ago. Today we need to stop Russia in Ukraine. We need to prosecute Putin and Russia for their crimes, because that will move Syria's case a step forward, and that will definitely prevent Putin and other dictators and tyrants all over the planet from thinking they can still commit crimes and get away with it.

JA: Thank you Wafa. I think this is especially prescient since we've seen the exact same commanders who have committed crimes in Syria now being sent onto the battlefield in Ukraine.

As we wind down, what are the possibilities for association and collaboration in the future? We've talked about problems and maybe the missed opportunities between Ukrainians and Syrians (and the rest of the world). But now what can we do? What are practical, hopeful suggestions?

“When we look at the politics of entitlement that colonial and imperial powers have, we need to go to frameworks of domestic violence, psychology, and psychiatry. This is psychological warfare. There is belittling, there is demoralizing, there is victim blaming.”

YY: I agree with what Wafa just said: every time there is a war, every time there are atrocities, every time there are violations of rights and the only thing that follows is a warning and a stern condemnation, there is further enabling of further violence. And there is not just that: there is an emboldening of the perpetrators of that violence. We've seen that with Putin, with Assad, with the United States, with the Israeli government; we've seen that with all sorts of different regimes. The list goes on.

I agree that the current stage of war of Russia against Ukraine—again, we're in the ninth year now—could have been prevented. The strength of reaction that we're seeing now, we should have seen in 2014. Why was it acceptable to choke off parts of Donbas and Crimea? Even since 24 February, we've seen more comments coming out from the United States about a 'minor incursion' having these consequences, and a 'major' one having those. There has already been an incursion, that's eight years old. It has been war. We thought there was this international order where borders are sanctified. But now looks like there is a gradation scale: a certain amount of land is somehow okay to take, and certain types of weapons are okay to use. Can we at least have a chart of how many women it is okay to rape, how many civilians it is okay to kill, and how many houses it is okay to bomb, so we can at least get some clarity? I'm obviously being sarcastic. It boils my blood listening to this. The current atrocities could have been prevented, had there actually been proper action.

It will be eighteen years in September since I've been living in the UK—I'm in Ukraine right now but I'm normally in the UK. In the UK, I've seen audiences with the Queen held for heads of state who persecute and execute people publicly and who perpetrate war crimes—and she's selling weapons to them. So selling weapons to murderous regimes is okay but giving weapons to people trying to protect themselves from those regimes is somehow morally reprehensible? It really doesn't make any sense to me.

There's one other thing I wanted to say because it's very important: we need to look into

intersectionality and interdisciplinary work properly. When we look at the politics of entitlement that colonial and imperial powers have, we need to go to frameworks of domestic violence, psychology, and psychiatry. This is psychological warfare. There is belittling, there is demoralizing, there is victim blaming. We saw it with Syria, and we see a lot of it in Ukraine: like, somehow Ukrainians forced Russia to come and bomb its cities. In an abusive relations framework it makes sense.

The sense of entitlement, the combination of an inability and an unwillingness to accept you do not have a right over the other person or country or city—that is something we need to be thinking about. We saw this in the international discussions of “what to do with Ukraine,” how we need to appease Putin and give him a bit more of Ukrainian territory. What does that even mean? You do not appease a bully. When did it become acceptable? But I’ve read it from some leftists, and I heard it from the Stop the War Coalition, and even from some Ukrainian so-called leftists, that maybe some territory is okay to give away to Russia as long as it preserves civilian life. No! That’s already happened, and we know what happened in those territories. We know the persecution, the torture, the kidnappings, the destruction of industry and environment. How are we going to decide which Ukrainian cities and which Ukrainians it is okay to give away to Russia? How are we even having this conversation? It is not okay, and it pains me.

I also understand that this is an existential fight. If we do not push Putin’s army out, there will be more wars and more fighting and more suffering. I agree, Wafa, you hit the nail on the head: if Putin’s army had been stopped in 2014 we wouldn’t be discussing this war now, because it wouldn’t have happened. The international so-called community of leaders has failed in this instance. It’s not the only failure, I’m aware of that, very painfully. There has been a systematic failure. The way it’s systematic makes it emblematic of myriad failures.

“We have to shape a new internationalism with those who are in a similar situation, with those who are faced with similar prejudice. And I’m not only talking about Ukrainians and Syrians.”

TB: I agree with Wafa that the best way Ukrainians can help Syrians now is winning this war. Probably this will change the international situation, and probably this will give an opportunity to also change something in Syria. At the same time, our obligation now, when so much attention is paid to Ukraine at the international level, is to strengthen and amplify your voice and remind about Syria as much as possible. Tell us how we can help and assist you. How can we amplify your voice? Which of your demands can be supported by us?

I’d like to react to what Yassin said, that you don’t have to try and convince Western anti-imperialists who keep writing silly texts. I disagree. To a certain extent, yes, we’re not able to change everybody’s opinion. But in Ukraine, the leftwing is quite a bit more generalized. One of the reasons I wrote that letter to the Western left was because I believe that we have to fight capitalism, and global socialist movements should be the ones who do that. There is a huge responsibility on the Western left. We have to do something with these idiots so that they understand something. We are weak here, but they are the biggest audience that our words matter to.

Yassin’s and Leila al Shami’s texts have been very useful to me, because they helped me to better understand the problem. We have to shape a new internationalism with those who are in a similar situation, with those who are faced with similar prejudice. I’m not only talking about Ukrainians and Syrians. Let’s take Hong Kong: those who protested in Hong Kong also were faced with this wrong attitude towards them from the Western left. Same in other countries where people are fighting anti-Western authoritarian regimes. We have to build a dialogue with them. Because now, unfortunately, due to the hierarchy of the global system—let’s take Yassin and other thinkers: where can Ukrainians find out about them? Only Western media in many cases.

“There is no way that this brutality and these tyrannies and dictatorships will last. There is no way they will rule us forever. There is no way that we will keep being slaves for capitalism, for imperialism, and for dictatorships. There is no way that this is going to be the reality of the next generations.”

WM: Yesterday I was also contacted by a journalist, and he asked me why it’s important for Ukrainians and Syrians to get connected, and how would they do that? I said that it’s not just important, but there’s no other option for us but to get connected together and support each other. There is no way out of this absurdity and brutality that we’ve been witnessing for the past couple of decades unless we come together, get to know each other, and support each other.

We didn’t know much about each other before a couple of years ago. And yes, the situation in Syria is complex, obviously. But this should not be our way to say, “I am out of politics, it’s too complicated.” Everything is complicated. But there are Syrian activists and Ukrainian activists who dedicate their lives to make things easier for you. Listen to activists. Listen to Syrians and listen to Ukrainians. Listen to us.

I am based in Berlin and this is my way to invite everyone who is in Berlin to come to the demo we have on Saturday. On Saturday there is a call to protest from the Berlin Easter March—to demand “peace with Russia.” Yes, it is that absurd. We are calling another protest for the same day, as Syrian and Ukrainian activists as well as people and activists from Belarus, to say that it’s not that shallow, it’s not that stupid: there is no way for sustainable peace without first stopping the ongoing crimes and prosecuting all war criminals. There is no way that any peace can be achieved if it does not center the victims of these wars.

In Berlin (and I know this is the case in many places), Syrians and Ukrainians are coming together, they are getting to know each other, they are supporting each other, they are organizing protests and events, they are trying to help each other in every possible way. This is the first step.

I hope this doesn’t sound pessimistic, but if I’ve learned one thing in eleven years it’s that it is a very long fight. I came to the point that I am satisfied that I might not see Syria as a free, democratic country. Maybe not even the next generation will. This is fine, because I know that what we are fighting against is that brutal, and that criminal. The world we live in is that absurd. We fight today together, and Ukraine is fighting today, every day, and we are still fighting in our own way, each of us from their own position, because we know that there is no way that this brutality and these tyrannies and dictatorships will last. There is no way they will rule us forever. There is no way that we will keep being slaves for capitalism, for imperialism, and for dictatorships. There is no way that this is going to be the reality of the next generations. This is a fair enough hope that keeps me fighting on a daily basis.

Also, not only are we fighting against the same enemy, but that enemy is Russia. When it comes to Russia, propaganda is not just one aspect of their war against us. On a daily basis in my personal life, I fight to convince people that my dad is not a terrorist, my dad is not ISIS, my dad does not deserve to be somewhere between life and death, and my family deserves to know where he is being held and why he is being disappeared for all these years. Being here today is one step to inform each other—and also to fight against these narratives. In Syria today, maybe the war on the ground is over, but the battle over narratives is ongoing. The least we can do is fight against it and present a counternarrative to that of Russia and other dictatorships.

YHS: As Taras said: please win the war. This will be good for us. First of all it will be good for you. And it will also be—not least important—good for Russia. There are many courageous, decent, and honorable people who are against Putinism and against this machine of war and lies and

propaganda. The defeat of Putinism would be good for them.

Second, the more networking, the more common spaces that we share, like the one on Saturday in Berlin—these are the activities that should go on. Maybe we will create spaces. We don't have a Ukrainian-Syrian space. We need a space. We organize meetings outside from time to time where we are here in Berlin. But in other places, in France, in the UK, the US, wherever we can—and hopefully some day in Kyiv and Damascus. I read today about some Syrians who went to Ukraine in a bus: they took some food and medicines, and they brought back refugees. This is amazing. This is a very good thing. Symbolic—but these are the activities that we need, and just to keep meeting and talking and listening to each other.

Sebastian Ordoñez: Hi everyone, I just want to close the space by thanking Joey, Yassin, Wafa, Taras, and Yuliya for holding the space with such dignity: a space of care, a space of listening, a space where people joined us from all over the world. Because we know, as Wafa just reminded us: we fight, but we fight together. I want to thank you for the spaciousness to have a conversation like this: rooted in pain but still giving us hope: hope of winning, as you all highlighted, and hope of building power from below against imperialism in all its expressions. And I also want to thank you for helping us to make sense of the current realities that you face and that we all face by sitting with the complexity and inviting us to learn from each other.

This conversation has opened up the possibility of talking about other conflicts and other sites of struggle—Ethiopia, Yemen, Haiti, to name a few. Those opportunities for conversation will also be opportunities for association and for peace, to continue to build bridges in pain.

I want to thank our interpreters: thank you for your commitment to linguistic justice and your brilliance. Finally, I want to thank all of you for being here today. There were over 200 people who joined us. Thank you for your time and energy for bringing that presence, which highlights the importance of dialogue and connection.

Joey Ayoub

Yassin al Haj Saleh

Wafa Mustafa

Yuliya Yurchenko

Taras Bilous

Sebastian Ordoñez

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Antidote Zine

<https://antidotezine.com/2022/04/15/our-wounds-are-bridges/>