

Syria's "Voice of Conscience" has a message for the West - "It came to me as a shock that most of the left have sided with Bashar al-Assad"

Sunday 6 November 2016, by [AL-HAJJ SALEH Yassin](#), [HISHAM Marwan](#), [HUSSAIN Murtaza](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2016).

YASSIN AL-HAJ SALEH has lived a life of struggle for his country. Under the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad, he was a student activist organizing against the government. In 1980, Saleh and hundreds of others were arrested and accused of membership in a left-wing political group. He was just 19 years old when a closed court found him guilty of crimes against the state. Saleh spent the next 16 years of his life behind bars.

"I have a degree in medicine, but I am a graduate of prison, and I am indebted to this experience," Saleh said, sitting with us in a restaurant near Istanbul's Taksim Square. Now in his 50s, with white hair and a dignified, somewhat world-weary demeanor, Saleh, called Syria's "voice of conscience" by many, has the appearance and bearing of a university professor. But he speaks with passionate indignation about what he calls the Assad dynasty's "enslavement" of the Syrian people.

Saleh was living in Damascus in 2011 when Syrian civilians rose up to demand political reform. That protest movement soon turned into open revolution after government forces met the protestors with gunfire, bombardment, mass arrests, and torture.

From painful firsthand experience, Saleh knew the cost of challenging the Assad regime. But when the uprising started, he did not hesitate to join it. He left home and spent the next two years in hiding, helping Syrian activists organize their struggle.

By late 2013, Syria had descended into anarchy. The conflict between the government and a range of opposition forces had become increasingly militarized. Like many other activists for the revolution, Saleh was forced to flee across the border to Turkey. That same year, armed groups in the Damascus suburbs kidnapped his wife, along with three other activists. ISIS kidnapped his brother in 2013. Neither has been heard from since.

Saleh is now among the millions of Syrians living in Turkey as refugees. He travels the country helping to train Syrian writers and activists in exile, while writing and speaking about his country's plight. As a leftist, he has also been a vociferous critic of a growing international consensus that has come to see the Syrian conflict in Bashar al-Assad's terms — as a fight against terrorism.

Our interview with Saleh is presented below, lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

Murtaza Hussain, Marwan Hisham - Please tell us briefly about your own background in Syria.

Yassin Al-Haj Saleh – As a university student in the late 1970s, I was a member of one of two Communist Party organizations actively opposing the regime. At that time, there was an uprising in Syria that involved students, trade unionists, lawyers, and members of other professions who were fighting against the Assad government, as well as a separate conflict between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. There were regular worker strikes in Aleppo, where I was living, and I saw with my own eyes security forces breaking down the doors of homes and businesses.

To be arrested in Assad's Syria, you didn't need reasons. But in 1980, hundreds of my comrades and I were detained as part of a campaign by the government to break Syrian society.

I was young, and the early years in jail were very difficult. We suffered harsh treatment. In later years, our conditions were not so bad and we were allowed books and dictionaries. I learned English inside prison, and for 13 years, I read maybe 100 books or more per year. In the last year of my imprisonment, I was transferred to Tadmor prison, which is one of the most vicious places on the planet — a concentration camp for torture, humiliation, hunger, and fear. I was then released in 1996.

The experience of prison transformed me and my ideas about the world. In many ways, it was an emancipatory experience. I developed the belief that to protect our fundamental values of justice, freedom, human dignity, and equality, we had to change our concepts and theories. The Soviet Union had fallen and many changes were occurring in the world. My comrades who refused to change, those who adhered to their old methods and tools, found themselves in a position of leaving their values behind. This is one reason why many leftists today are against the Syrian revolution — because they adhere to the dead letter of their beliefs, rather than the living struggle of the people for justice.

What did you expect from the left in its response to the Syrian revolution?

It came to me as a shock, actually, that most of them have sided with Bashar al-Assad. I don't expect much out of the international left, but I thought they would understand our situation and see us as a people who were struggling against a very despotic, very corrupt, and very sectarian regime. I thought they would see us and side with us. What I found, unfortunately, is that most people on the left know absolutely nothing about Syria. They know nothing of its history, political economy, or contemporary circumstances, and they don't see us.

In America, the leftists are against the establishment in their own country. In a way, they thought that the U.S. establishment was siding with the Syrian revolution — something that is completely false and an utter lie — and for this reason they have stood against us. And this applies to leftists almost everywhere in the world. They are obsessed with the White House and the establishment powers of their own countries. The majority are also still obsessed with the old Cold War-era struggles against imperialism and capitalism.

Recently, an event in Rome that displayed images of those tortured and killed by Assad was attacked by fascists. Just days before, it had also been attacked in a local communist newspaper for promoting "imperialism." There is a growing convergence between the views of fascists and the far-

left about Syria and other issues. The reason for this is that perspectives on the left are outdated. They are interested in high-politics, not grassroots struggles. They are dealing with grand ideologies and historical narratives, but they don't see people — the Syrian people aren't represented. They are holding on to depopulated discourses that don't represent human struggle, life, and death.

What should people on the left who have misconceptions know about Syria?

The Assad regime, the junta that rules Syria today, has transformed the country from a republic into a monarchy. As you are aware, Bashar al-Assad inherited the post of president from his father in 2000. I am not aware of a statement from one Western leftist protesting against this transformation of a republic into a monarchy. The state has become the private property of the regime, while the economy has been restructured according to the neoliberal agenda.

In the genes of this regime, it is inscribed that there must be no rights for the Syrian people. We are not citizens. We cannot say "no" to our rulers. We cannot organize, we cannot own the politics of our country, let alone organize in the public space or take part in it actively. They force us to suppress ourselves. We are, under their rule, politically speaking, enslaved.

Many on the left look at Syria and know nothing about the relationship between the Assad regime and the Western powers. The Assad regime was never a power against imperialism in the Middle East. In fact, it always sought a role for itself in the imperial game in the region. But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Assad was against imperialism. Even if that were the case, the Syrian people would still be a part of the deal! We as a people are not merely a tool for the narratives of the Western left. This is our country. We are not guests.

Over the past several years, there has been, in effect, a "Palestinization" of the Syrian people. We are being dealt with by the regime, and the world, as a people who will be annihilated politically. Maybe they won't kill all of us. Many of us are still living. After all, only around half a million or so have been killed so far. But politically, they are annihilating us the same way that the Palestinians are being annihilated.

At the same time, there is a corresponding "Israelization" of the Syrian regime. The same way that Israel relies on the United States for United Nations Security Council vetoes to protect it internationally, the Syrian regime now relies on vetoes from Russia. In Israel's conflict with the Palestinians, only one side — Israel's — has air power. The same is true in the conflict between Assad and the opposition.

The Assad regime has become a representative of the internal First World in Syria, the Syrian whites. I think the elites in the West find Bashar al-Assad more palatable than other potential interlocutors. He wears expensive suits and has a necktie, and, ultimately, these elites prefer a fascist with a necktie to a fascist with a beard. Meanwhile, they don't see us, the Syrian people. Those who are trying to own the politics of their own country have been rendered invisible.

What is your position on the Islamist parties?

Under the umbrella of Islam we have many things. There is the religion of Muslims, which should be respected. Then there is political Islam, which includes parties and groups with which one should negotiate and find compromises — groups such as Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Then we have what I call nihilist groups like ISIS, which must be fought. But to be successful in fighting against these groups you must give a chance to politics. You cannot isolate nihilists like al Qaeda and ISIS without giving something to other parties with whom you can negotiate.

I am a secularist and a nonbeliever, an atheist. But I don't find it democratic to fight against ISIS while being Islamophobic, while hating Muslims and expressing suspicion toward them, and at the same time stating that you don't want any political role at all for Islamists! This is extremism, it is an extremist position, and it is what reactionary Islamic extremism is built on. When you refuse to accept the moderate groups, practically speaking you are supporting the extremists.

How do you respond to the perception in the West that the Assad regime is a bulwark of secularism in Syria?

I think there is something Islamophobic about this position. The Assad regime is not secular. It is a sectarian regime. You don't need anything related to progress or the enlightenment to be loyal to one sect and fight against other sects. They employ sectarianism as a strategy of control, as a means to seize power forever. In their own slogans they openly say, "Assad or we burn the country," and "forever, forever," in reference to holding absolute power over the country.

In secularism, there is inherently the idea of not discriminating between people on the basis of their religion or confessional community. Is this the case in Syria now? No, it is not. If you are an Alawite, your chances of getting a job or having real power in society are greater than if you are a Sunni or a member of another group.

After the revolution began, I was in Eastern Ghouta [near Damascus]. My travels also led me to the eastern parts of Homs and Raqqqa. When the Salafists came, I never once saw people celebrating. I am not saying that people were angry, but these groups didn't have real popularity. People are against the regime, and these groups are against the regime. Their presence filled a gap.

What was it that allowed the Salafists and other groups to gain prominence after the revolution?

For 30 years, the Baath Party has made a project of crushing all political life in Syria. So when the uprising came, we had no real political organizations, only individuals here and there. Islam, in our society, is the limit of political poverty. When you don't have any political life, people will mobilize according to the lowest stratum of an imaginary community. This deeper identity is religion. When you have political and cultural life, you can have trade unions, leftist groups, and people are able to organize along any number of identities. But when you crush politics, when there is no political life, religious identity will prosper.

Let me give you as an example the Syrian Kurds. Over the years of Baath Party rule, they were manipulated, divided, and even denied their very existence as Kurdish people in what was called the "Syrian Arab Republic." Despite this, Kurds were still allowed to organize politically. Not one of their political parties was exterminated. When I was in prison, many of my friends were from Kurdish political organizations. They would only ever spend a year or two in prison at a time, never 15 or 20 years.

The Baath Party crushed all political life for Syrian Arabs, including the Muslim Brotherhood parties. When they were confronted by the Syrian revolution, they strove to crush that as well, and this has now resulted in ISIS. ISIS is not an expression of the Syrian revolution. It is an expression of the destruction of Syrian society, and of Iraqi society before it.

Bashar al-Assad has begun to portray himself as a partner to the West in fighting terrorism. What are the implications of accepting such a claim?

The war on terror narrative that Assad has adopted is one that is based on empowering states and

empowering the powerful against the weak. That narrative weakens those who are already weak, which is why he has used it to present himself to the world as a partner in the campaign against terrorism.

I don't think that there is anything democratic or progressive about this narrative, or about the practices and institutions related to this war on terror framing. The reason the world is now in a crisis is that the major global narrative now is not democracy, justice, socialism, or even liberalism — it is all about security and immigration. This means that Trump is better than Clinton, Marine Le Pen is better than Hollande. It means that a fascist is always better than a democrat, which means that Bashar Assad is better than the opposition.

Accepting this terrorism narrative makes people like us, those who were active in the revolution, in its peaceful stage, and then in the armed struggle, effectively invisible. All those opposing the regime are ISIS — as Bashar al-Assad is always saying — and the only other choice is him. Accepting this war on terror narrative weakens and disempowers people like us. It disempowers leftist, democratic, and feminist Syrian organizations and activists, while empowering the regime and the extremists.

Now that many people have become alienated from Islamists after witnessing their terrible practices in many areas, is there a chance for secular forces to win people back?

Yes, we have a chance. But only provided that Bashar al-Assad is not there. For us to be a real alternative in the country, Bashar and this junta regime that has killed hundreds and thousands of our people cannot be there. I am a leftist and I am an atheist, but I will not fight against ISIS if, behind my back, you put your hand in the hand of Bashar al-Assad.

If the proposal is, "Let's focus on defeating ISIS and then afterward, maybe he will still be around," I will not do it. The one who tortured, humiliated, killed, and despised my people — Bashar al-Assad — is a criminal who must be held accountable. This accountability will furnish a basis for secularists, nationalists, and democrats to compete against mainstream Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood, and to fight against nihilist groups like ISIS. Both ISIS and Bashar al-Assad are the extremist powers that must be eradicated in order to build an inclusive Syria.

I am not saying that things will be OK when these groups are gone. There will be huge problems to deal with in Syrian society. But right now, we don't have problems in Syria. We have tragedies, we have massacres, we have a horrific human condition. We have a destroyed country and a destroyed society. When Bashar is gone and ISIS is gone, we can hope for a dynamic of rebuilding and reconciliation, in which Syrians can start to put their country back together. But as long as he remains, this will never be possible.

What do you say to those who concede that Bashar al-Assad is a tyrant but argue that he is a lesser evil than ISIS and should be kept in power to preserve stability?

For us, as Syrians, let me be frank: ISIS is the lesser evil. They have killed maybe 10,000 people, whereas Bashar al-Assad has killed hundreds of thousands. Ask yourself how anyone could tolerate such a situation. Could you imagine that in 10 or 15 years, after crushing all opposition, perhaps the son of Bashar al-Assad will proceed to rule the country after him? How horrible. How criminal. If Bashar al-Assad survives, after killing hundreds of thousands of people, expatriating 5 million more, displacing 6 million within the country, inviting the Iranians and the Russians and Shia militias from around the world to invade Syria, if such an abhorrent criminal survives and maintains his political power, the world will be a much worse place for everyone.

What is your opinion on the possibility of Western intervention in Syria?

First, it is a fable that Western countries did not intervene in Syria. The reality is that they intervened in a very specific way that prevented Assad from falling but guaranteed that the country would be destroyed. The United States pressured Turkey and other countries very early on to prevent them from providing decisive assistance to the Syrian opposition. In doing so, these countries vetoed Assad's being toppled by the Syrian people by force. Meanwhile, as we can see, they have no problem watching the Syrian revolution be crushed by force.

The United States also negotiated the sordid chemical weapons deal with Russia in 2013 — a deal that solved a big problem for America, Russia, Israel, and for the Assad regime, but did nothing for the Syrian people. The United States also led the "Friends of the Syrian People" group, which it then sidelined and destroyed. Leftists in the West should know this: In many important ways, the Americans have been supporting Bashar al-Assad. The United States helped create a situation in which Syria would be plunged into chaos, but the regime would remain in power.

So if there were a military intervention to depose Assad today, would you support that?

I want Assad to be hanged now, not tomorrow. But there needs to be a vision, the cornerstone of which is to change the political environment of Syria substantially — to build a new Syria on an inclusive basis, with a new majority in the country. For such a majority to be built, you must both overthrow Bashar al-Assad and fight ISIS. This will help Alawites to be independent from the Assad regime and will isolate the extremists among the Sunnis. It will be good for the Christians and Druze and other minorities and will help unite them around issues that transcend sectarian divisions. We have people who are Sunnis who still refuse to be identified by their sect. There are many people like me and others who want real change and want to be part of this new Syrian majority. Only such a solution could be sustainable, and it will be the beginning of solving this crisis that is aggravating the entire world now.

Ultimately, it is not a matter of intervention against Assad. It is a matter of helping Syrians to regain ownership of their country and to hold the criminals accountable. ISIS is not that big of a monster. It can be easily defeated. Many of us are people from Raqqa [ISIS's capital], scattered around the world, and we are all ready to go and fight them. But we are not ready to go back to slavery under Bashar al-Assad. This is a clique and junta that killed and tortured on an industrial scale. Under international law, it is meant to be held accountable. This is not something that we are inventing. We don't ask Obama or Hollande to come solve our problems. International law was breached several times, and those who did this should be held accountable. We have a special tribunal at The Hague and Bashar al-Assad should be referred there.

Do you have hope for the future of Syria?

We are resilient people. We still believe in human dignity and in a better future for ourselves and others. We have a cause, and it is a just cause. I think that the Syrian revolution liberated us from an inferiority complex we had toward the other people of the world. We don't wait for others to solve our problems now, or to define for us what is just and what is fair. We are struggling for our emancipation, without illusions. We are hopeful that more people will join us in this struggle. It is not just about Syria any longer. It is about the world.

P.S.

* The Intercept. October 26 2016, 6:16 p.m:

<https://theintercept.com/2016/10/26/syria-yassin-al-haj-saleh-interview/>