

Alep, the West, Russia & Syria: ‘Tyrants across the world know now they can maintain power through mass slaughter.’

Sunday 18 December 2016, by [AL-SHAMI Leila](#), [LEVY Gabriel](#), [MATVEEV Ilya](#) (Date first published: 29 November 2016).

Interview with Leila al-Shami for Open Left.

Leila al-Shami, co-author of *Burning Country*, a writer who has worked with human rights movements in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, gave this interview to Ilya Matveev and Gabriel Levy on 29 November for OpenLeft (before the fall of Aleppo to the government forces). It sheds some light on the social and geopolitical situation which has rendered the Aleppo crisis so severe in these past weeks. It is also, however, part of an emerging transnational conversation between anti-war activists in Russia and Syrian activists, spearheaded by portals such as OpenLeft, where the interview will soon appear in Russian.

Gabriel Levy (G): What is the situation right now?

Leila al-Shami (L): The situation in Aleppo is absolutely critical. And the voices which can be heard from there are just showing how much panic and fear there is in rebel-held East Aleppo. People have been trapped in East Aleppo since late August. There are tens of thousands of people under siege and there's no way for them to get supplies in, there's no way for them to get out. So they are effectively in an open-air prison. They are being subjected to extremely heavy bombardments and airstrikes. Gas has been fired at people. Hospitals are being deliberately and systematically targeted. Fuels are running out, there is no water. Civil defence structures have been targeted. People are now using carts to try to transport the wounded to the hospital. There has been very high level of civilian casualties.

Hundreds of people are now trying to move to areas controlled by the regime or by the YPG [i.e. the People's Protection Units led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party]. Of course many people are fearful to leave. There have already been unconfirmed reports of arrests and executions by pro-regime troops. It's important when we look at what's happening in East Aleppo to be aware that the Syrian army is playing only a supporting role in this onslaught. The grand advance is being led by Shia militias, who are reporting to Iran, and the air bombardments have been carried out by Russian and Syrian air forces.

Russia has justified this onslaught by saying that it is bombing ISIS and other groups such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which is former Jabhat an-Nusra, since its intervention in Syria. But there is no ISIS presence in East Aleppo and Al-Nusra has a small presence and certainly doesn't control the city. The main defenders of the city are Free Syrian Army troops and it is these, and civilians, who are now being targeted. It is very clear that this blood bath and this absolute slaughter of the people is

only going to increase extremism. The people of Aleppo wanted freedom from dictatorship and now they are just being annihilated. There have been massive advances in the last couple of days. The regime is now taking control of up to a third of rebel-held East Aleppo and it looks like Aleppo is falling.

Ilya Matveev (I): When you say that the bombardments target hospitals and civilian objects - do you mean that Russian planes do that as well?

L: Yes, Russia has been systematically targeting hospitals and civilian infrastructure. Not only in this recent escalation but since Russia's intervention began. There are no hospitals operating in eastern Aleppo at all. Just the other day the last pediatric hospital was taken out. The only medical facilities which are operating are small medical clinics. And they are in an absolutely desperate situation, they are running out of supplies, doctors are under huge pressure to respond to the needs on the ground.

G: Please comment further on Russia's claims that it is fighting ISIS and terrorists and so on. I know that through the United Nations, this has been put to the Russian government repeatedly. Do you know any more about their response to the claims that these bombs are targeting hospitals and civilians?

L: There have been many denials by Russia of these claims in the media. But these incidents, these war crimes have been very well documented not only by Syrians but by international human rights organisations.

G: It may be difficult to answer this question, but can you say anything more about what is likely to happen in Aleppo over the next days and weeks?

L: It is hard to say, I mean the slaughter is going to continue. What we are absolutely fearful of is that these Shia militias are going to go in on the ground, and carry out a mass slaughter of remaining civilians and opposition. The focus now is obviously on the very desperate situation of Aleppo, but we need to recognize that the suburbs of Damascus are also falling. They are also being subjected to horrendous bombardments. There are more than a million people living under siege conditions in Syria. Some of these suburbs around Damascus and areas of Homs are now being cleansed of their remaining inhabitants. The situation is critical across the country.

G: Has the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election changed things?

L: It's very difficult to know what exactly Trump is about. I think he is unpredictable. We don't have a clear idea of what his foreign policy is going to be. But what we do know is that he certainly admires Putin, and will probably work with him to defeat ISIS. It's been reported that the onslaught in Aleppo started following Trump's victory and apparently a phone call between Putin and Trump. We don't know whether he gave him the green light, but certainly Putin was aware that Trump is not going to intervene. Trump is going to continue the isolationist position which Obama has followed. I think he is going to keep Assad in power. He obviously admires strongmen and dictators such as Sisi and Erdogan. He has a strong disregard for human rights and is very much focused on security issues and protecting America. Of course, Assad's victory means an ongoing misery for Syrians and an increase in extremism. It means that the refugees will never return and the prisoners will stay in jail.

Tyrants across the world know now that they can maintain their power through mass slaughter. The impact of what's happening in Syria is seen in the whole world. We've seen Brexit, we've seen the election of Trump, and we've seen the rise of the far-right across Europe. So I think these are very frightening times. And the left is in a complete shambles and unable to respond.

G: I have been involved in discussions among left wingers here in the UK, and when the issue of the no-fly zone comes up, people feel organically - as leftists who protested against the Gulf war and the interventions of the Western powers in Iraq - that it is difficult to support a call for a no-fly zone. In one of your recent articles, you cut through that discussion, to my mind in a convincing way, by saying that the issue is actually not a no-fly zone implemented by the Western powers, but anti-aircraft weapons - which the Free Syrian Army, whatever we think of them, had asked for and repeatedly had been unable to get. Could you sort of expand on that point?

L: Sure. I think sections of the left have done massive disservice to the Syrian revolution by framing the debate as a debate for an intervention or against it. The no-fly zone call was a call for the protection of civilians and came out of a large section of Syrian civil society. That is not the only call on the table. It is not the only option. Quite recently, a month or two ago, there was a statement put out by 160 Syrian intellectuals - democrats and secularists, pro-revolutionary intellectuals - who were opposed to any intervention in Syria, whether from Russia or the US. So a no-fly zone is not the only option on the table, but I think we need to say: "Civilians are being massacred on a massive scale, they need to be protected, the world needs to take action to stop the slaughter, so what are the options?" Well, either the people have to have weapons to defend themselves, or they have a right to call on the foreign states to intervene. Saying that people have to accept being slaughtered, to defend our anti-imperialist principles, is morally obscene. It's not an option.

There are plenty of other options There have been calls to airdrop humanitarian aid to areas under siege and there can be calls against the massive war crimes that are happening, such as the targeting of civilian infrastructure. There are plenty of different options: it doesn't have to be reduced to solely interventionist argument.

Furthermore, this idea of intervention and American-supported regime change is not grounded in reality. Because Obama has taken an isolationist position, he has not intervened to topple Assad's regime, he has never called for the regime to go. He did at one point call for Assad to go but the idea was that the regime would be kept in place - a Yemen-type solution. Obama has vetoed weapons to the Free Army troops, he has stopped other countries from providing defensive weapons that they need to protect communities from air attacks, and he has effectively handed over Syria to Russia - to another savage imperialism, following the chemical weapon attack in Ghouta.

What people also don't realise is that America is intervening in Syria, it has been intervening for two years now against ISIS, it has killed hundreds of civilians. We are not seeing people on the street protesting that intervention. What these sections of the left are actually protesting is the American intervention to topple Assad - not the US intervention which is attacking civilians.

I: I want to develop this point. My question is: you speak about different options, for instance, the supply of defensive weapons, but, as I understand the situation, the balance of forces is such that, without decisive intervention from the West, the rebels will always be attacked and besieged. Is there really other way around except full scale intervention that could actually stop the civil war?

L: The option that everybody would want is to stop the conflict, to stop the various actors fighting, to stop the bombs from falling. That's what people want. They want a negotiated political solution. It's very very clear that Trump, Assad, Putin, and Iran believe that the solution is a military solution. They show no willingness really to go to negotiations. They think there's a military solution to that conflict. So we're stuck in this situation.

I: So if we consider a different outcome: for instance, that Russia withdraws and stops

helping Assad. If Russia is out of the picture, would it be possible to arrive to any kind of solution without Russian military involvement?

L: Of course, it would be possible, because the Assad regime would have fallen long ago if there was not Iranian and Russian support. The regime was on the brink of collapse before Iran stepped in, and then it was on the brink of collapse again before Russia stepped in. There is massive military and financial support from these imperialist actors, which is keeping the Assad regime in place. If they were out of the equation, I am sure that the Syrian people themselves could get rid of the Assad regime. But now, after six years of struggle, there are no easy solutions any more. If the Assad regime falls, there are still going to be huge problems in Syria, as there are so many actors involved, there are many extremist groups involved. But, certainly, you can not begin to address those issues while the regime is in place.

G: About the character of the movements against Assad. Reading the book that you have written with Robin Yassin-Kassab, I get this overwhelming impression of an enormous popular movement - really one the greatest popular movements of our time, a bit reminiscent of the Iranian revolution of 1979. What you show in the book, and I am convinced by it, is that the starting-point for understanding what is now a war is to understand the character of that popular movement - that this started not as a war between states, but as a war of the regime against its people. You showed how “divide and rule”, which was brought to the Middle East by the Western imperialist powers in previous episodes of history, has been used by the regime. Have I understood your argument? Is it accepted?

L: I think that's one of the issues. The social war, the struggle of oppressed classes, which caused Syrians to take to the streets calling for the downfall of the Assad dictatorship, is often overlooked. The geopolitical war is where the focus has been. Of course, those original revolutionaries who took to the streets in their thousands, in their millions, were calling for things like freedom, human rights, social justice, dignity. They were met with the most vicious repression which contributed to the sectarianisation of Syria, to the increasing extremism of opposition to Assad.

I think the real distinction needs to be made between the opposition to Assad, and Syrian revolutionaries. These two are often confused and this is extremely unhelpful. When people talk about Syrian opposition, they often reduce it to the most authoritarian elements, such as the Salafi militias, or they talk about the external opposition - for example the Syrian National Coalition, which has very little relevance on the ground. The anti-Assad movement is a very broad coalition. It includes hardline Salafi jihadi groups such as al-Nusra, nationalist Salafi groups with very extreme agenda such as Ahrar al-Sham, it includes moderate Islamist groups which are conservative democrats, and it includes the Free Syrian Army, which isn't really an army at all but a coalition of autonomous (often local) brigades which identify around the idea of a democratic civil state and to some extent still embody the original goals of the revolution. But the Free Syrian Army has not been supported.

That's not to say that the Free Army doesn't have lots of problems, they do. There have been individuals and groups that carried out abuses, groups which are currently attacking civilians in West Aleppo. We have seen the rise of warlords involved in extortion and kidnapping. Yet, together these groups are defending civilians and communities from imperialist and fascist onslaught and in such conditions people are not going to reject them. But people do reject the hardline groups when they try to impose their political vision on the people and we see this very clearly with the ongoing protests against al-Nusra in Maarat al-Numaan, Idlib. We also see that, when there were ceasefires, people came out onto their streets in large numbers, chanting for the Free Army and waving revolutionary flags, not the black banners of the jihadists. People are still very much committed to

the democratic ideals of the revolution.

Furthermore, people outside Syria only focus on the armed opposition while, of course, the civil opposition is numerically bigger although it is politically the weakest. It includes human rights activists and relief workers, independent media, the democratic councils, men and women of all different backgrounds, who are really struggling to find alternatives to totalitarianism. They are trying to build democratic alternatives, reduce extremism and sectarianism and they are doing it in incredibly difficult circumstances and without any support. This is where the left should focus its solidarity.

G: What I understood from your book is that, even in the horrific conditions of recent years, there has been example after example of people trying to take collective action - such as the people coming out after the ceasefires that you just mentioned. You do not disguise that this movement is being ground down by this endless violence, and this huge weight of military advantage that the regime has. Today, does that collectivism and that action on the ground still persist?

L: Yes, of course, it continues. If it didn't people would not have been able to survive in the areas liberated from the regime. Until earlier this year there were over 400 local councils in Syria, many of which were democratically elected, providing services to the civilian population. There are many different groups that are organizing to keep the communities functioning. There is the White Helmet Civil Defense Force. Doctors and teachers are trying to keep health and education systems operating. There are many groups that are organising against extremism. You have groups in Raqqqa and Dier Al Zour, activists who are struggling against Daesh occupation there. These people and groups really show that there is a third option in Syria. But the problem is that that isn't getting support and it is that which is being annihilated. And if it is annihilated, all we are going to be left with is these two competing fascisms - the regime and Daesh (or other extremists). At the moment, people's primary goal is survival. The situation on the ground is absolutely desperate. Many activists have left the country. But if the bombs stop falling, there is every reason to believe that those activists will go back and join with the people who are still struggling in Syria. They would regain much greater strength. The war lords only have power in conditions of war.

G: Are there practical ways that people here or people in Russia can connect to that movement? Is there a way people can do something practical which goes anywhere beyond gesture politics?

L: Of course, there is. I think the first thing is to challenge the media now which has adopted the Assad regime's narrative, which says that the only choice is between the regime and Daesh. Those are not the only two options. There are many groups in Syria and individuals still committed to the original values of the revolution. It's our responsibility to find out who those groups are and promote their voices. A major problem is that everyone's talking about Syria, and no one is actually talking to Syrians. We need to be getting the voices of these groups out there and showing that these groups exist and that they are worthy of support. We can also give much more material support to those groups, whether that's about sending financial support to groups, or e.g. translating the statements that they put out to different languages to challenge the dominant narratives. The main problem is that a lot of these groups are largely invisible. We need to make sure that they get much more visibility. At the moment they feel that everyone has abandoned them.

G: Could you say more about the failure of the left and so called anti-imperialism, and also, about the relationship between the movements in the Arab-majority population areas and those in Kurdish areas such as Rojava, where from Europe many anarchists, for example, have gone to participate, risking their lives with all the best intentions?

L: First, on the broader issue of the left. I think we need to make distinctions: there are leftists, both individuals and groups, that have done a lot of work in solidarity with Syrian revolution - but they are a minority. The majority of the left is what I would call the authoritarian or pro-fascist left - and I don't really believe that these people are leftists at all. I see very little difference between some of the discourse they are coming up with and the discourse of the far right. They've been obsessed with this regime change narrative. The left used to believe that a popular struggle against a tyrant was called a revolution, but they seem now to have abandoned all hope that people themselves can actually make a change and, instead, they are focused on this chess game and the geopolitics of states. They are refusing to see the social war and the internal struggle of the oppressed classes. Through doing that they are completely denying agency to Syrians. It's an extremely racist and orientalist discourse.

We need to ask ourselves who represent us: is it these states, political and business elites, or is it Syrian workers, students, oppressed people, those people who are trying to build alternatives to authoritarianism within this situation. This authoritarian left has just completely adopted this "war on terror" discourse, the regime narrative. It now wants stability over justice, it has been spreading this extremely racist slander that all the Syrian opposition are jihadists. Or they see the Syrian regime as somehow the last bastion of anti-imperialism - against all evidence to the contrary. It's a very selective anti-imperialism, because it is only directed against the US, and, as I have said, there are other extremely savage imperialisms which have larger involvement than the US in what's happening in Syria now.

Another issue is that the large parts of the Western left are the people who have made solidarity with Syrian revolution impossible. Aleppo is facing absolute annihilation. There are huge atrocities that are being carried out. I used to ask myself how people could sit and watch the Holocaust happen, why they weren't outraged or did not intervene. I don't ask this question now, because we have the answer in Aleppo. We are watching such a massive slaughter of civilians and people are standing by. The reason is because the left has obfuscated the issues. It made these major slanders against Syrian revolutionaries. When you look at the debates on the left now, people are attacking humanitarian groups for seeking foreign funding. No one is suggesting where these groups are supposed to get money from to respond to the massive humanitarian needs when the whole economy has collapsed. All the hospitals are out of service in certain areas. And they are criticizing the Syrian opposition because there are not enough women present in the protests, instead of talking about Assad's mass rape campaign against women or women being tortured in detention, or the struggles which women are facing against Islamic extremist groups and also within democratic opposition circles to try to participate. That's not the debate. They are not recognising those struggles. They are fixated on this idea of illusionary pure revolution. Only someone who has never actually been involved in a real social struggle can believe in this. This has been a huge problem from the left.

I suppose, at the end of the day, when all foreign powers leave Syria and when Western leftists find some new struggle to pontificate about, what will be left in Syria are Syrians. That will be Alawites, Kurds, Arabs, shia, sunni, Christians, and they will have to find a way to work together or live together, otherwise they are going to be in a state of perpetual war. So those who care about Syria should be supporting democratic, anti-sectarian groups so they can continue their work. The left has just abandoned any responsibility towards Syria and the result of that is the rise of extremist groups.

G: I agree with your view of the left. There are also people who think that Putin is also some sort of bastion of anti-imperialism. It would be funny, if it wasn't so serious.

L: Yes, it is serious now. not only for Syria but for the whole world. I am just frightened of the direction the world is going at the moment. And the left is just in such disarray, it is unable to respond to that.

G: And what about Rojava, the Kurdish enclave? In the book, you say that at the start of the revolution, there was a really positive relationship between the movement in that area and movements in other parts of Syria. And that changed under the pressure of circumstances. How do you see things now?

L: Yes, at the beginning of the revolution, the revolution was not party-led. It was a spontaneous movement where people were self organising horizontally within coordination committees, in both Kurdish and Arab areas. There was great solidarity in those early days between Syrian Arabs and Syrian Kurds, on the popular and grassroots level. But then political elites started taking over: you have, the PYD in the Kurdish areas, and the Syrian National Coalition, which have both done disservice to their people, both Arabs and Kurds by contributing to the sectarian discourse.

The SNC has failed to recognise the Kurdish demand for self-determination, even simple things like changing the name of the Syrian Arab Republic just to Syrian Republic, it refused to do it. Certain elements within the anti-Assad struggle have been bombing Kurdish civilian areas and condemnation of such war crimes has been weak. On the other side, the PYD [Democratic Union Party of Kurdistan] has spread a lot of propaganda about the nature of Syrian opposition, trying to present it all as extremist jihadist groups not recognizing its diversity and at times has been seen as cooperating with the Assad regime against the Syrian revolution. It has been expanding its territory into Arab majority areas. Sadly, activists and leftists have also fallen into this sectarian discourse. Nobody, neither Arabs nor Kurds, will benefit from that. They need to find a way to work together, if they want to see a better future.

People on the left have provided support for Rojava, which is vital. There are revolutionary groups on the ground that have achieved absolutely remarkable things, in terms of establishing direct democracy on the community level, in terms of having a large participation of women in that movement. So there are many things to support, but also many issues. The PYD has an authoritarian aspect to its programme. It is preventing other opposition groups from operating, and arresting political opponents. So it does have to be critical solidarity – the same kind of solidarity has to be shown to grassroots movements and struggles elsewhere in Syria. You have the local councils which were established all around the country self organising. Whilst they have often not included women in their government structures, in other ways they are more progressive than the Kurdish experiment, because they are not party-political, they are not beholden to one political or religious ideology. They are practical and focusing on the business of providing for communities.

I: I have a couple of questions about the Russian involvement in Syria. To develop the question about what can socialists do to help the situation: do you think that anti-war movement in Russia is actually critical at this moment? As I understand the current conjuncture, the leftists and the opposition in Russia should really step up the efforts to oppose Russian intervention and Russian involvement. Do you think the Russian anti-war movement can really play a role?

L: I think it can be essential. I don't know the Russian activist scene, I don't know what is possible in terms of Russian activism, or what are the restrictions on people working politically in Russia. But definitely we would like to see a strong anti-war movement. We would like to see the Russian government being held to account for the massive war crimes that it is committing. And challenging, most importantly, the Russian narrative, this idea that it is intervening solely to fight against terrorism, it is not. It is intervening to crush the democratic opposition to Assad and keep Assad in power.

Now is Russia's end goal Assad? Is Russia's main interest Syria? Well, certainly, Putin has increased Russia's influence in the region. It sees Syria as an asset and it has established more military bases

in Syria. I don't think that Syria is actually Russia's main target and the reason for its intervention. The main reason is to counter the US hegemony, Russia wants to establish itself as a key actor, something which it has definitely done through the negotiations. I think also another target is Europe. Russia's massive bombing campaign has sent thousands of refugees fleeing to Europe. At the same time Russia is funding far-right anti-immigration parties across Europe. This is creating destabilisation which we are definitely seeing with Brexit and the rhetoric of movement against immigrants. I don't think the reason for the rise of the right in Europe is solely Russia, of course, its roots are in the neoliberal economic policies and the austerity, but Russia is certainly capitalising on that and exploiting that. Russia being in Syria now has economic advantages. Syria's oil and gas has all been sold off to Russian companies.

One of the main areas where Russia has influence is the propaganda war. Russia Today and Sputnik News are really undermining democratic discourse, and undermining the notion of the common consensual truth. They have been putting out a complete campaign of disinformation. The point of that is not really to convince people of an alternative, it is just to establish doubt and to make people think "well, actually, I don't know what's happening, we don't know what the facts are". That way we are paralysed, we are unable to get involved. And I think it is very dangerous. One of the ways to counter that propaganda war is to focus on Syrian narratives, on raising Syrian voices, on allowing Syrians to speak for themselves. Because denying people their right to a narrative is obviously the main tool imperialists use.

I: I would like to add a couple of remarks. I see two main problems that create obstacles for an anti-war movement in Russia. The first obstacle is pretty obvious: the nature of the Russian regime itself. It has grown more authoritarian simultaneously with its growing involvement in Syrian affairs. Currently, for instance, an anti-war demonstration was prohibited in Moscow. It means that anyone who participates will just be arrested. This demonstration was actually not organized by the left, but by the liberal opposition in Russia. And their opposition is isolationist: their argument for opposing the Syrian war is that Russia is too weak economically, and has too many internal problems to deal with Syria, and that this whole Syria operation is a kind of adventurism on Putin's part, whereas we have to resolve our own problems. So this is not a leftist argument, and the left has a different agenda. But I would say that within Russia the problem is that the majority of Russian leftists, on the one hand, are influenced by the pro-Assad left. So there's a huge degree of influence in terms of narrative, for instance, in terms of obscuring the diversity of the movement in Syria, that you mentioned. Within the Russian left there is a huge doubt that there are any kind of democratic forces left in Syria at all. Another problem, I think, is that Russian left is also feeding the Western left these narratives. So there's kind of a double movement: on the one hand, the influence of the Western leftists, on the other hand, the Russian left is also distorting the picture, especially those parts of the left which have grown increasingly campist. After this whole confrontation with the West, many Russian leftists have turned to the position of loyalty to Putin; they see him as a person fighting the West. There is also a lot of neo-Soviet nostalgia in this.

L: I don't know how much longer it is going to be tenable to hold on to the idea that Putin is fighting the West, if there is an alliance between Trump and Putin. Let's remember that Russia and the US under Obama have been militarily cooperating for some time now in the fight against ISIS. Russia also has military coordination with Israel. This idea that Russia is somehow representing this anti-imperialist axis is very confused. The reality is different. What the reality shows is that strong men and states will come together at the end of the day to protect their interests against the interests of the people and against popular struggles. And I think that is what we need to focus on and what we need to try to challenge in terms of the anti-imperialist discourse.

I: I agree completely, but the temptation to support Putin is basically the same within Russian left as it is in the Western left. On one hand, there is the anti-American position, on the other hand, there's the exaggerated view of neoliberal global order, which is undermined by Putin and even by Trump himself now. So to me it is embarrassing to admit that a large section of Russian left is not actually supporting Trump, but is hailing his victory as a sign of the end of the neoliberal order, is saying that change is now imminent, and Trump can actually even be an ally in this. This only exemplifies the general degradation of the whole leftist perspective under the influence of propaganda and this fake confrontation and reenactment of the Cold War.

Another question is about the nature of relationship between Putin and Assad. Specifically, do you think Assad is using Putin to his advantage, that Assad may have some leverage over Putin? Usually it is presented that Putin has been a patron of Assad, a leading person in this relationship, but I suspect that Assad has some influence on Putin and might even have the initiative in this relationship. What do you think?

L: That is a very good question and I don't really have an answer. In many ways the Assad regime has collapsed. The people who are fighting for Assad very often are not Syrians. He is so dependent on Russia and Iran. There are a lot of concerns within the regime and pro-Assad circles about the extent of the external influence now, and about whether actually Syria is now under Russian and Iranian occupation. I think we've seen with negotiations around Zabadani, for example, that it wasn't the Syrian regime that negotiated, it was Iran. How much is Syrian regime calling the shots? Even the Syrian pro-Assad fighting forces seem to be in complete disarray, they don't actually seem to be reporting to the regime any more, they seem to be reporting to influential, often Alawite warlords who have power in certain areas. It is a huge issue: to what extent the Assad regime is actually calling the shots in Syria? Certainly now the struggle is against the foreign occupation.

It will be interesting in the next period to see how the relationship between Russia and Iran develops. There seem to be some tensions and it is very difficult to have an assessment of how big these are. Just in the last couple of days, there have been unconfirmed records of Russia actually bombing Iranian Shia bases, groups. We don't know because the information coming out of Syria is very hard to verify at the moment. But there's tension there, and it's going to increase. Trump, and the people he has appointed to his administration, are very hostile to Iran. So if Putin moves closer to Trump, the dynamics can change again on the ground. I don't have an understanding of the balance at this point. It is definitely something to watch: who is going to call the shots in Syria over the next period should the opposition be crushed, which is the direction things are moving in now.

I: That's a very good suggestion to look at the relationship between Putin and Iran. I don't have any more questions.

L: I have a question for you, because I haven't previously had an opportunity to speak to Russian activists. What do you think is possible in terms of Russia? Where do you see the openings for Syrian activists to reach out to Russian leftists?

I: I must admit that at the moment the Russian left is extremely disoriented and disorganized. It has also experienced a lot of splits, not only because of sectarianism (this is basically the same everywhere), but also because of the recent events. In 2011-12 we had a huge opposition movement against Putin, and mass rallies in Moscow and Saint Petersburg especially. Sections of the left refused to take part in this movement because they didn't want to have anything to do with the liberals who dominated the movement, who were its hegemonic force. However, most of the leftists, even pro-Soviet, the Soviet nostalgic left, took part in the movement. But then the Crimea situation came. After the

annexation of Crimea, the majority of Russian leftists of any kind changed their position and became essentially loyal to Putin, because now they saw him as a person who restores the Soviet project. This was due to the strong kernel of red imperialist Soviet mentality within the Russian left.

The anti-imperialist internationalist left in Russia is quite small and it also suffered disproportionately from persecution of the government. Tens of people were sent to jail after the 2011-12 movement unfolded. The internationalist left is decimated now. There are no strong leaders and very small organisations numbering tens of people. To me what is important is to at least have a clear position and to voice it. I represent the Russian Socialist Movement, a small group of maybe hundred people all across Russia. It has Trotskyist roots, but it was modelled after a broad left coalition which it has never become (the model was the French NPA back in 2011 when this organization was created).

The main obstacle ultimately for the anti-war movement is the political situation itself. I don't see how the position against war can become extremely influential in Russia right now, because the liberal opposition is preoccupied with different things. Unfortunately somehow Russia's involvement in Syria does not become a point of moral outrage in Russia. To me it is very unfortunate but the problem is that even mainstream Western media like the *New York Times* are right in blaming Russian population for silence on this issue. What they say is actually true. For the opposition, Russian involvement in Syria is not such a moral issue.

L: It is not just for Russia, everyone in the world who has failed to stand in solidarity with Syria.

I: I think in the West ultimately there's more understanding that there's a civil war, hundreds of thousands of people are dead now. In Russia the government was very successful in spreading doubt, in obscuring the situation. The point was not to make one point of view completely dominant, but just to confuse things in general like "it is so complex on the ground, we don't know what's happening". People don't even think that there are non-Islamist forces fighting Assad. How would you be sure that Russia is not doing something positive in this situation? This is the confusion that the Russian authorities are trying to create.

L: That's what I was trying to say about this propaganda war and this campaign disinformation. I agree with you 100%: the point is to create confusion so people don't know what's happening.

I: Because of this, Russian opposition can not be activated and energised by some specific issue. This issue has to be very close to home. Through the last several years there were episodes when some specific event triggered a huge protest. There was even an anti-war movement, but in relation to Ukraine. When people thought that there could be an open warfare with Ukraine, there was a demonstration of 30,000 people, which is huge for Russia. So there was a reaction, but with Syria, because of this total confusion, and also because of the lack of internationalist perspective on the liberal side, there is a very weak response. The left should be leading the anti-war movement in the case of Syria, but it is not happening because of the weakness of the left and the pro-Assad position of many leftists. Our website's position has always been anti-Assad, we tried to make this point and distribute this kind of materials in Russia to clarify the situation. For this, even from the left, we have faced false accusations of receiving State Department's money. Basically, it is a kind of double isolation.

L: That accusation is made all the time.

I: The irony is that Russian government accuses everyone of receiving State Department money. But when it comes to Syria, it becomes OK, even for leftists who are otherwise persecuted by the government, to accuse other leftists of the same thing. That's a strange twist. But in any case, my efforts will be to spread the word, and to try to make known the actual situation and to make the anti-Assad position more clear.

P.S.

* Left East. December 16, 2016:

<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/interview-with-leila-al-shami-for-open-left/>