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Dissidents of the left: In conversation with Yassin al-Haj Saleh

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Andy Heintz



Islam, culture, nationalism, revolution, exile, and the West's anti-democratic Middle East policies are just part of the ground covered in this in-depth interview, to be published in the upcoming book, *Dissidents of the International Left*.

The below is one of a series of interviews conducted by the

journalist Andy Heintz due to be published as a book, *Dissidents of the International Left*, in May 2019. Yassin al-Haj Saleh is a Syrian writer, former political prisoner, and co-founder of Al-Jumhuriya, where he continues to contribute **regularly**. His latest book is *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*.

Andy Heintz: What are your thoughts on Trump's foreign policy approach to Syria?

Yassin al-Haj Saleh: I don't see any difference in vision between Trump and Obama. Both men prioritize the War on Terror over any political or ethical issues related to the Syrian people's political struggle for freedom, change, and justice. The Americans are playing an extremely nasty role in the northwestern part of the country. In a way, they are preparing a future of massacres and ethnic struggles in the region. The region is composed of Arabs and Kurds. The United States is following the traditional colonial formula of relying on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). The SDF is dealing very disrespectfully with the local population. They are relegating the local population to invisibility and it is the same logic that the people experienced under the Assad regime. The new occupying powers are imposing their rigid, dictatorial one-party system with their personality cult of [militant Kurdish leader Abdullah] Ocalan and completely ignoring the struggle for freedom and change that happened before them. It is as if our history begins now. It is the colonial thing and business as usual.

Trump is submitting Syria to Putin. The fascist regime in Russia will copy itself in Syria with a sectarian element. The West has a history of colonialism in the Middle East and Russia is no exception. The Russian plan is to rehabilitate Bashar al-Assad and his regime without discussing the real issues like the maybe 200,000 prisoners and the perhaps 75,000 disappeared in Syria.

Heintz: What do you think would be a smart way for the international community to bring peace and stability to Syria?

Al-Haj Saleh: The situation is no longer about Syria. We don't need a solution, we need a clear vision of the problem we are in. It's a global thing, it's not just Syria. Our new role may be to invent new tools, new theories and new ways of seeing things. We need a new vision and a new project for the world.

Heintz: You have talked about the need for a new global movement. Will such a movement need intellectuals and critics that infuse their knowledge and understanding of issues with feeling and deep empathy with the downtrodden?

Al-Haj Saleh: Addressing the influential powers of the world, my abducted wife Samira al-Khalil wrote in some of her papers from Eastern Ghouta after the chemical massacre in August 2013: "The world is one small village, is not this

what you always say? Why are you leaving the population of one neighborhood of this village massacred, sieged and starved?"

A small village it is, indeed. And this is an irreversible universal gain, a very dear one. And God knows that it was very costly. But the global system is bad and worsening. Racism, environmental changes, a global crisis of democracy and a universal hope deficiency are four main aspects of a deteriorating system. World change is more and more an imperative. There are no ways out of the one world, so we either kill each other in an aggravatingly narrowing world, or find ways for creating new spaces, new worlds, in the one world we share.

But it seems that we lack global movements with new ways of thinking, imagining, communicating and acting. States and terrorist organizations are not models to imitate. The model for new movements could be that of refugees appropriating the world and those conscientious people welcoming and helping them. I feel that states, the richest and most powerful in particular, consider refugees a far more serious threat than terrorist groups. They are right. States are "legitimate" monopolies of terrorism, and those terrorist networks are their "illegitimate" rivals and doubles (they tend to be correlative in a way that you cannot exclude one without excluding the other). The relation between the two is an embodiment of the world "stuckedness" in anti-politics, while refugee passage to prosperous Europe represents the alter-politics which is

becoming a universal necessity (I am referring to Ghassan Hage's terminology in his book, *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination*). Maybe we have to develop a combination of anti-politics and alter-politics. It is impossible to evade anti-politics vis-à-vis thuggish states like the one we have in Syria, but there is always a need to think of other forms of gathering and organization. Global responsibility is the political and ethical basis for a different world. What a man does is done by man. There is no us and them. We are all them. We are all responsible.

Heintz: Can you talk about the need to see the situation in Syria (and the Middle East in general) in a political and historical context, as opposed to a cultural one?

Al-Haj Saleh: I see Culturalism (or cultural determinism) as a plague that struck the studies of politics and societies of the Middle East; the Arab countries in particular. It offers a lazy explanation to the social and political dynamics of our societies by resorting to supposedly clear notions like Islam, Islamic civilization, fundamentalism, Sunni, Shia, and the like. In a mysterious way, it is thought that we can be defined, and our practices analyzed, by reducing them to "culture" the way economic determinism explained these very phenomena a few decades ago. In Syria and the Arab world, the culturalist approach was prosperous before the revolutions and its proponents are now optimistic again after the debacle the revolutions suffered from. But while economic determinism was translated politically into populist or developmental nationalism, the political translation of

culturalism is elitism and neo-fascism, à la the Bashar al-Assad model.

Adonis, who is the best Syrian example of this approach, found in 2013 that the problem of dictatorship lies in the ra's (head), not in the kursi (chair of the ruler), namely the ra'ees (the head of state). At that time the ra'ees had killed 50,000 people, of whom the poet said nothing. Here, we are not very far from seeing the ra'ees as a poor victim of the ra's, and that we should vindicate him from the aggression of that backward head (singular, as the platonic poet had it, the heads are identical), which is full of... Islam. I think that the Christian right in the West do really embrace this creed. Bashar al-Assad, the "elected" ra'ees according to the old poet (the election of Bashar is a sheer invention from the poet), who defined terrorism as "pathological thought, perverse creed and anomalous practice that rises in environments based on ignorance and backwardness," found the culturalist discourse suitable for diagnosing the Syrian situation in a way that laid responsibility away from his dynasty ruling the country for more than 40 years when the revolution erupted in 2011. The culturalist poet offers him the best world: the problem does not lie with him killing "his people" but with the bad contents of the one ra's of those people rebelling against him.

I refer to the Syrian poet to say that this overturned view is related to an overturned world, what I call the internal first world in Syria, in which the nation of Assadist "white" Syrians, with expensive suits and neckties, rule an internal

third world, or the nation of “black” Syrians. If our domestic culturalist discourse sounds like a rumination of the orientalist discourse, which was culturalist by definition, it is because it replicates the structure of the relationship between the Western First World and the “Eastern” Third World. This relation moved to the cultural level after the end of the Cold War. Samuel Huntington borrowed his conception about the Clash of Civilizations from Bernard Lewis, the extremely white orientalist. Huntington’s civilizations are reducible to culture, which is reducible to religion. These reductions enable almost everybody to be an “expert” on the Middle East, explaining everything with Islam. When Bashar refers to terror and explains it with culturalist language, he is only showing how much he is white and to what world he belongs.

Islam has become another name for complete ignorance of politics, economy, history, society, geopolitics, culture, and Islam itself. That is why a radical critique of culturalism is a necessary introduction for showing the real aforementioned structure, and to rely on social sciences for tools to analyze our societies like all other societies on the planet. (My last book in Arabic, Culture as Politics, published in 2016, deals with this very issue.)

Let me mention some facts that you will not find in the culturalist literature and mainstream coverage of Syria. The country lived under a state of exception since 1963. The republic was transformed into a monarchy in 2000; this came into being around two decades after 20-30 thousand

people were killed in a big massacre in Hama in 1982. Thousands were executed and killed under torture in Tadmur (Palmyra) prison, and thousands were tortured, humiliated, and starved on a daily basis for around 20 years. Thirty seven percent of Syrians were under the poverty line of 2 dollars a day in 2007. Having a passport was never a routine thing in “Assad’s Syria,” and was always a means of extortion. The slogan of the regime militia known as shabbiha is: “Assad or nobody! Assad or we burn down the country!” (They rhyme in Arabic.) The slogan of the regime sieging and starving people in many towns in the country is: “Kneel (obey) or Starve!” (They also rhyme in Arabic). The “big prison” is a metaphor used by many Syrians to describe the country under the Assads. The other two metaphors widely used by Syrians about the country and their public experiences are “kingdom of silence” and “the wall of fear” (built within individuals and between them). A third one is “the internal cop” (referring to self-censorship).

It should be clear now that our ra’s is occupied, indeed colonized, by a fear ra’ees and culturalism is only the veil that covers the head of this essentially discriminatory system.

Heintz: You have talked about the need to simultaneously offer radical criticism of Islam while at the same time criticizing some of the criticisms being made of Islam by political commentators. How hard is it to get this view across in a media landscape that often reduces conflicts to

simplistic black and white narratives?

Al-Haj Saleh: Allow me to clarify one important point. My writings are almost all in Arabic and my targeted audience is Arabic readers. I work in a field where I felt that I have to differentiate my positions from apparently similar positions. I am secular, for instance, but I find nothing in common with many secularists who kept utter silence toward Assad's crimes in Syria. (I came to call them Huntingtonian secularists.) I criticize Islam and Islamism, but the subtitle of my book *Myths of the Successors* is *A Critique of Contemporary Islam and a Critique of the Critique* (2011). I did not want to give credit to essentialist types of criticism of Islam, easily harnessed in sectarian or "civilizational" battles.

It seems, however, that culturalism and the critique of culturalism, a recurrent theme in my work in the last decade, builds a long bridge between many in the Arab world and in the West. We live in a small world, which is the only analytical unit for understanding what is happening here or there. True, we do not occupy equal positions in this small world, for it is characterized by multileveled polarizations and disparities, yet it is one world, and this is a great universal achievement. This one world should change so that it offers more freedom, more justice and more dignity to its populations.

Islam is not only part of this world; it is also formed and

reformed by it, mobilizing in these processes of formation and reformation of its imaginaries, memories and habitus. So, in a way, there is no West and East (or “the rest), no Islam and the rest as the Islamists usually tend to think of the world. The identifications, dis-identifications and un-identifications are processes happening in the same field, producing, distributing and reshuffling our identities. What many people call their traditions are mostly invented ones, which date back to only one or two generations. Islam is not out of this tradition of invented traditions (I am referring to Eric Hobsbawm, of course).

Yes, it is not easy to critique Islam and many forms of its critique at the same time. This puts you in a precarious position, attacked from both sides, which is my case. The same applies to the critique of the American policy in the Middle East for instance. I have been always very critical of these policies, but I am equally opposed to an essentializing critique that attributes inherently evil characteristics to the Americans. I feel that we have to build a global position that enables us to criticize X without giving credit to Y, the latter being sort of anti-X.

Let me give one example of the necessity of a double critique of Islam and Huntingtonian secularists. In the Syrian context, Islam helped many people to own politics; I mean to gather, to trust each other, to have a common language, to protest against the regime, and to carry arms against it in a later stage. This is very important in a politically impoverished society like ours. At the same time

the Islamic ideal will not let owning politics by the ordinary people go far. They should obey their leaders and avoid fitna (social discord). This same concept of fitna is used by the Assad regime to criminalize people's protests and resistance. I think we have to see this dynamic and its inherent contradiction to develop a radical critique of Islam and Islamism, while defending the people and aspirations toward appropriating politics.

Heintz: Can you describe some of the demonstrations and other non-violent actions taking by the peaceful wing of the Syrian revolution before the Assad regime's ruthless repression made some protesters turn to armed conflict? Is the peaceful wing of the Syrian revolution still active today?

Al-Haj Saleh: The uprising was composed solely of a "peaceful wing" in its first stage that came to an end only after the Assadi state occupied Hama and Deir al-Zor in August 2011. The two cities witnessed huge demonstrations with hundreds of thousands participating. These are **two videos** from Hama on July 1 and July 29 (the popular names of the protests were "Leave!" and "Your Silence is Killing Us," respectively). As can be seen from these videos and many, many others, people thought the regime will be overthrown through occupying central public spaces with their great numbers and expressing their aspiration for freedom and political change. It is noteworthy that the demonstrators were holding the formal Syrian flag while struggling to own politics at that time. Later on that flag was replaced by the pre-Baathist flag or "the independence

flag” —it was the country’s flag years after Syria got independence from the French mandate in 1946—that came gradually to be known as the revolution’s flag.

The replacement symbolized processes of radicalization and militarization among revolutionary environments that found themselves victimized, arrested, tortured, and killed by the dozens every day from the beginning. I was in the country at that time, and I was able to monitor the process of militarization: the people were pushed to despair from peaceful demonstrations, and the ones who stopped joining demonstrations took up arms and did not simply stay home. People first relied only on themselves; then they asked for international protection that never came, and only to Allah as the last resort. Islamization is a social and political process, and not an essence lurking somewhere only waiting to unfold itself.

Abd al-Basit al-Sarout is a good example. He was a young football goalkeeper who for months in 2011 and 2012 led demonstrations in his neighborhood in Homs, al-Khalediyya, chanting for the revolution by modifying popular songs. In 2012 he carried arms with many of his friends to defend their neighborhood. He quit smoking and showed signs of Islamization during the siege of al-Khalediyya, and in May 2014 was transferred out of his native city through a deal with UN supervision. Sarout is still one of the greatly admired and respected heroes of the Syrian people. ([Here](#) is a trailer of a film made about him and his friends, Return to Homs.)

What I want to say is that the static opposition of peaceful protests vs. armed struggle hides the dynamics that led from one to the other; those of radicalization, militarization, and Islamization. These dynamics are triggered by the violence of the Assadi sectarian state, the failure of international laws to protect the brutalized and dehumanized Syrians, and their belief that the only fate that awaits them if they stop fighting is horrible death.

It is a simple fact, though, that many Syrians kept on protesting peacefully while many of them fought the Assadi state up to July 2012, 16 months after the beginning of the revolution. This can be checked easily by those who want to really know. After that demonstrations became literally impossible because the Assadists began using jet fighters, Scud missiles, and chemical gases against rebelling neighborhoods and towns. Obama did not volunteer to talk about this in his infamous “red line” speech. It is a known fact that can also easily be checked that the moment there was a ceasefire, in the late days of February 2016, that people in many areas outside the control of the regime rallied in demonstrations against the regime and [al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch] al-Nusra Front. The simple moral of this remarkable event is that the people cannot fight two brutal organized enemies at the same time, and that they tend to resist peacefully as long as this is possible. Armed struggle was never a free choice for the rebellious Syrians.

Heintz: You have said that a political precondition for

fighting the Islamic State would require the end of the Assad regime. Why do you think so many Western and Middle Eastern countries have concentrated mostly on destroying the Islamic State instead of helping other Syrian forces oust Assad's deplorable regime?

Al-Haj Saleh: Apart from the destructive influence of culturalism in the West, especially when it comes to Arabs and the Muslim world, the postmodernist re-enchantment of the world that reintroduces souls, gods, ghosts, and devils into a de-objectified world, the "war on terror" is a tried method to consolidate states and power elites and weaken popular movements everywhere. Unelected people are ruling most of the Middle Eastern countries, supported by political elites who have never suffered in the West. The latter are isolated from the human struggle, and strongly linked to perceptions like stability, order, and rationality as the highest virtues of Middle Eastern politics. Rationality means showing discipline toward the powerful, no matter how brutal the "rational" elite are toward the weak. Order implies supporting what Hillary Clinton named in her Hard Choices "the security infrastructures;" that is the likes of the Assadi killing machine. Stability means disowning people of politics, killing them and destroying their cities when they try to occupy public spaces and openly express their ideas about public affairs. And because of the centrality of stability in the region, the biggest political shift in Syria's history before the revolution went unnoticed in the West. I mean the inauguration of the Assad monarchy in 2000. Not a single elected leader said a word about this extremely reactionary and tyrannical shift. Actually Madeleine Albright, the then-US secretary of state gave her

blessing to the event, and Jacques Chirac of France did the same. Maybe they told themselves: this is how things are in the Arab world! It is in their culture! Probably in their genes! Well, maybe the fact that 20-30 thousand were killed in Hama in 1982 has some relation to our dynastical rule. No?

By the way, I am not aware of a single leftist criticism in the West or the world at large of this destruction of the republic in Syria, are you? There has never been a democratic policy in relation to Syria from the side of the “international community.” The Western democracies’ policy toward Syria is simply siding with the fascist with a necktie, Bashar, against the fascists with long beards. Modernist ideology and culturalist fatalism offer justification to this extremely unethical approach, which is deeply rooted in racist assumptions that deny the Muslim population reason and rationality.

Besides, I suspect that the wealthy powerful of the world tend to think that power is the solution to the world’s problems. They can wage wars, and they need reasons for them. Terror is the ideal reason for wars outside and for more fear and discipline inside. And it enhances those monopolies of violence named states and strengthens statist thinking. This world order made the Assad regime’s huge crimes invisible while highlighting Daesh’s [ISIS’] crimes. The media all over the world was a very obedient chorus in this job.

Heintz: Do you think there was a time that an international intervention in Syria would have been justified, or do you

think the countries like the United States should have instead focused their energies on arming the Free Syrian Army and other anti-Assad forces to bolster their chances of overthrowing the regime from the inside?

Al-Haj Saleh: There has always been an “international intervention” in the Syrian struggle. It is a myth that the “international community” is reluctant or unwilling to intervene in Syria. What would one call the American pressure on Turkey and other regional countries not to efficiently arm the FSA since late 2011? What do you call the Syrian cities and towns that have been bombed by fighter jets and barrel bombs for four years while Syrians were unable to get a few stinger rockets to defend themselves? What do you call the despicable chemical deal in September 2013 that gave the Assadi state full impunity to kill the rebellious Syrians with other means, indeed with the same means many times since?

By the way, that criminal deal was not only a big gift to the fascists with suits and neckties, it was no less a big gift to the nihilist fascists with shaggy beards. The latter won in two ways: first through nurturing the nihilist tendencies among many Syrians seeing the world’s apathy toward their life and death only two weeks after 1,466 of them were killed at the hands of the Assadi state; second through a free propaganda campaign for Daesh and al-Qaeda ever since by the obedient chorus alluded to above. And who lost? Only the vulnerable rebellious Syrians who had been asking for help for 30 months at that time.

Among those people were my wife Samira Khalil, and my friends Razan Zeitouna, Wael Hamada and Nazem Hammadi. Those lowly people who supervised the criminal dealt a huge blow to the Syrian democrats who became extremely vulnerable after that despicable day. My wife and friends were abducted in the theater of the chemical massacre around 100 days after the crime of which they were trustworthy witnesses.

There was a pimp in that dishonorable deal: the United Nations, which consented that its special commission that investigated the chemical massacre would not name the perpetrator! Was there the slightest possibility that the 'rebels' did it, and the UN chose to not name the culprit? What a world!

There were also many voluntary false witnesses, some of whom are Pulitzer Prize winners: Seymour Hersh. The man offered a grandiose tale involving Turkey and Nusra among others. Of course it never occurred to him to contact people in the field. In an imaginary scenario, Hersh, whom I met once in a hotel café in Damascus, could have contacted me for his report in [the London Review of Books], and I would have referred him to Samira and Razan who were living in Douma during and after the massacre and the sordid deal, to ask them about the likely culprits. Why was this unimaginable for this man? Because his high politics approach always made people like us invisible to him and his like. Well, he could have really won a third Pulitzer Prize

if he only opened his eyes and looked down. Samira and Razan were abducted by a local Salafi organization named Jaish al-Islam, one with strong bonds to Saudi Arabia (many other interesting details in the story).

I know also of a man who won a Nobel Prize and in a few years became “proud of” a criminal deal that led to the deaths of innumerable people in Syria and many other countries. (Allow me to refer readers to my [article](#) on the third anniversary of the massacre and on the Russo-American deal that succeeded it.) By the way, many people are still insisting that this same Harvard-Nobel Prize man was very “proud of” the fact that his administration was always the authority behind the agendas of important international events, and that he even had a label for this neoliberal form of imperialism: leading from behind! I am digressing, but I want to say that these two people, the Pulitzer man and (ig)Nobel man are from the same narrow elite, equally isolated from the world of “farmers and dentists,” as the White House inhabitant dismissingly described the Syrians rebelling against the Assad dynasty. They are both confined to the world of high politics, which make people like us simply invisible.

Back to the question. There was another part of the myth: that rebelling Syrians asked for American or NATO boots on Syrian soil. False. Many Syrians asked for help: international protection, safe zones, no fly zones, MANPADs. These methods could have done the job easily before the end of 2012 if it was not for American pressure through the Saudis

on some brigades not to enter Damascus. Now, dozens of countries are intervening in Syria, including the five members of the Security Council (Chinese personnel are training the Assadist military). The main criminal, the Assad state, is more secure now after these interventions of international law propagators. Conclusion: intervention in Syria is bad when it is against the elitist fascists. All other interventions are good and welcomed.

Heintz: You have written about how in Syria there are many different groups with their own narrative of victimization and excellence. Does this make it harder for healthy within-group dialogue and criticism, while simultaneously undermining the chances for a united front against Assad?

Al-Haj Saleh: We have three active victimhood narratives in Syria that came to the fore after the revolution: the Sunni narrative, the Kurdish, and the old Alawi one. These are not the discourses of the victims and are not designed for popular demands for justice. Rather, they provide elites with a good arsenal of effective, emotional, and symbolic tools for mobilizing people behind them against others defined in identitarian terms, and incriminating internal dissidence as a betrayal of the victimized community.

I prefer to use the word *mazloomiyya* in Arabic instead of victimhood because *zulm* is in opposition with *adl*, which means justice, and at the same time it's related to *zalam*, which means darkness, and to *zalamiyya*, which means

obscurantism. These linguistic connections assist us in assessing the essential function of mazloomiyya narrative: it is to prevent reflexive thinking or questioning the self. It is as if a veil is brought down on the face of the psyche, leaving it in darkness. When your political side is criticized you translate this into a communitarian language and promptly retort back: How dare you question our behavior, us the victims? Where were you when we were oppressed, impoverished, marginalized, humiliated? Implied in this is that you are an agent of them, a primordial denomination that is always united against us, with minimal or no differences, let alone internal struggles. In this way the peace within the self, collective and individual, is restored and dissent and plurality within it suppressed. And now we can justify the biggest crimes from our side by referring to older crimes they committed. And in this way politics is reduced to a crime competition between hard-hearted people, full of zalam.

Intellectuals are hardly absent from this competition: they either propagate mazloomiyya narratives, or obscure the roots of injustice and violence in the country and the region. And the world. Obscurantism is produced by intellectuals, many of whom talk a lot about enlightenment. Adonis, again, is only an example.

This is responsible for a very harmful shift: violence emanates from the very primordial nature of societal groups, it has nothing to do with the political or economic systems, with poverty and oppression, or with the world order. And I am afraid that these fables of mazloomiyya and excellence, with their processions of phobias and philiias,

are finding high demand in the West.

Heintz: Can you expound about how the Shia-Sunni divide in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries is not some predestined inevitability because of the so-called primitive nature of Islam, but as a conflict that has been stoked by the powerful to keep the poor masses from uniting against them? Is this strategy similar to the way poor white people were pitted against rights-deprived African Americans by the elites in the South at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States?

Al-Haj Saleh: I do not think that the postulate of the “the primitive nature of Islam” deserves comment. It is itself a pathological symptom of a primitive narcissistic disorder that attributes superiority or excellence to the self and inferiority to the others. There have been Sunnis and Shia in the region for more than a thousand years. The formation of the two confessional groups took around three centuries after an early Islamic civil war in the seventh century. The groups formed around two different approaches to that civil war. To make a long story short, Sunnis asserted unity of the nascent umma and Shia asserted justice more. Sunnis were able to identify with the Islamic empire, with its military and civilizational glories. The Sunni imaginary is haunted with images of conquest and greatness. The Shia imaginary is haunted with images of martyrdom and victimhood. However, the relationship between the two groups cannot be deduced from their doctrines or imaginaries. It has always been a matter of politics and history. There were more Shia in Aleppo in the 10th century and barely three villages in the 20th. Iran became Shia only in the 16th century. The two doctrines are not mutually exclusive. There is a deeper layer of Shia beliefs among

many Sunnis in Egypt and many regions in Syria, and maybe there is a layer of Sunni beliefs among the Shia of Iran.

The worst clashes in the past and in contemporary times were related to power, as is the case everywhere. A tectonic shift came into existence in 1979, with the Iranian revolution. This created a global center for the Shia creed, some of whose ideologues developed a translated version of it co-opting discursive articulations with modern revolutionary discourses, specifically talking about the downtrodden (mustadafoon, lit. weakened and oppressed). The Sunni world was still dizzy at that time after the defeat of Arab Nationalism in 1967 and 1973 in front of Israel and US, and a poisonous mixture of corruption and despotism was creeping in. The poison was made from oil revenues and blood. Partly under the influence of the Iranian example, partly because of that humiliating defeat, and partly because of a rising need for a collective project, the Islamists began to ascend and the secular Arab nationalism to decline.

The corrupt regimes ruling the main Arab countries were supported by the democratic West vis-à-vis all opposition, Islamist and secular. Islamists were horribly dealt with in countries like Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and everywhere. But most horribly in Syria. I was in prison the 1980s and through more than a half of the 1990s, and all this time the Islamists were referred to the Tadmur prison, maybe the worst jail on the planet. They were tortured far more

brutally than us communists. They began to develop a narrative of victimhood ever since, something that was aggravated after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, the Sunni Lebanese former prime minister in 2005. The Shia Lebanese Hezbollah, which was formed and is supported by Iran, is suspected to have had a hand in this terrorist operation. The party was and still is immune and, in 2013, it intervened openly in the Syrian struggle, siding with the Assadi killing machine.

This background is hopefully useful to understand a very interesting process unfolding now in front of our eyes: the Shiification of Sunnis and the Sunnification of Shia. The convergence of an inherited imperial imaginary with a victimhood narrative is leading to an al-Qaeda-like phenomenon. But the themes of justice and martyrdom are widespread now among Sunnis. At the same time we witness more emphasis on unification and imperial glory among the Shia communities in strong correspondence with the ascendance of a global Shia center in Tehran.

So the Sunni-Shia divide is not a matter of primordially separated beliefs and identities that shape politics in our region. Rather, it is politics that shape and reshape these beliefs and identities. False witnesses like Cyrus Mahboubian (a pen name of Nir Rosen) are not to be given any credit on this issue. In the Syrian context, sectarianism has always been a strategy for political control, essentially so since Hafez al-Assad ruled the country in 1970. Alawites,

who are an esoteric branch of Shia Islam, were made the backbone of the inner state as opposed to the outer state of Syria. The powerful inner state is composed of the Assad dynasty, the security agencies and a financial component with a preferential access to national resources, and it is extremely sectarianized. The outer state is the powerless administration, the government, the deteriorating educational system, the courts, Majlis al-Sha'ab (the parliament), etc.

Sects themselves are political constructs; they do not exist outside a sectarianizing system that controls public institutions and resources. The system relies on reproducing the sectarian divide, securing differential identification with the "State," and nurturing distrust among the population. It can do so through a differential access of people of different societal groups to power and resources. This means that your being from this societal group implies that you have some social capital others from a different group do not have. The capital could be a wasta (mediation) to get a passport, a job, or to be recruited in some elite army formation.

I want to say that sects don't belong to the world of beliefs and identities as opposed to the world of classes and powers as the itinerant look may have it. What makes the sectarian strategy especially dangerous is that it creates a common cause between the powerful wealthy within a sect and the poor. In Syria, the Assad state is built so that the downtrodden at the bottom are more divided than the new

notables beneath the dynastic summit that guards this order of things. And I suppose it is the same for the relationship between “poor white people” in the United States and “rights-deprived African Americans.” It is always an elitist method to divide and disempower the public.

Heintz: What are some important political, economic, social, environmental, geographical, and cultural issues in Syria that have not received adequate attention from the Western press despite the role they have played in the Syrian conflict?

Al-Haj Saleh: The main problem in the Syria coverage of media and study centers in the West is that they lack the sense of the political and ethical dimension of our struggle. Issues related to justice are usually absent. They mostly deny us political agency. Instead they usually tend to think of our struggles as irrational, “complicated” ones that erupt all of a sudden in violent ways. The rational West should intervene to rationalize those irrational boys, and to calm down the crises they frequently cause. The right method for this is crisis management, a method that systematically sidelines issues of justice and that is power-centered and state-centered. It goes without saying that when you “manage” a crisis, the Palestinian one for instance, you are maintaining it and saving it for more of your management in future. This method is only related to your needs as a rich powerful state or bloc.

The dominant discourses that share the act of producing knowledge about Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and the Middle East—the Geopolitical discourse and the culturalist one—are both depopulated, reductionist discourses that helped greatly in making local populations invisible, indeed nonexistent. These discourses have a dehumanizing effect that made our deaths something unimportant. The other face of this invisibility is the disproportionate visibility of factoids related to religion, sect, and ethnicity: every mediocre Middle Eastern “expert” knows that so-and-so is an Alawi, so-and-so is a Christian, or a Kurd. The “rest” are the “majority” Arabs and Muslims that the West should take great care to protect the minorities from its primordial threat.

That is why the coverage of Syria and the attitudes of the right wing and left wing media in the West were really scandalous. The majority of analysts know absolutely nothing apart from a few clichés and stereotypes. There are decent respectable people, but they are either isolated or slandered. And there prospers in the United States a theory of explaining our struggle through drought! Four years of drought preceded the revolution and caused it. So it's not a matter of politics, or of social demands or of a thuggish ruling junta. It's not what those irrational Syrians think; science says it is... drought. But this science is full of politics as much as it suffers from ethical drought. This environmentalist approach could be fully embraced by neurotic thugs like Bashar Assad, the same way he embraced the culturalist theory that absolved him of the horrible crimes his regime committed.

I feel that the social sciences are in a crisis in the West and maybe we are heading toward adopting the elite crisis management method in dealing with the “crises” in Western societies. The elites are not far from seeing the mobs in their own countries as irrational, and maybe they will prefer their local racist xenophobic politicians like your Donald Trump as a “lesser evil” to some Hispanic or Muslim “greater evils,” the way they decreed for us that Bashar is a lesser evil and Daesh is the greater evil.

Heintz: You have written that the Assad regime’s nationalism has been used to install barriers between Syrians and the outside world. Do you think nationalism or any belief system that includes either a bellicose hatred of the other or an arrogant assumption that their society is without flaws is one of the major reasons for strife in the world? For example, many people in the United States have seen Middle Eastern conflicts through a prism of primitive feuding based on fixed mentalities without taking any responsibility for America’s role in fueling many of these conflicts.

Al-Haj Saleh: Nations in my opinion are collective paranoiac constructs with intrinsic bad intentions against each other. Conspiracy theories spring from the very identical constitution of these constructs. This is true in ill-fated Syria ruled by the Assadist dynasty and in the United States of America. What distinguishes modern nation-states is that they are Darwinian creatures, their highest virtue is power. More power is always good. Weak states are malformed

creatures that are predestined to extinction, maybe through the intermediate stage of failing states. This is what the nature of nations decides. Now we know that many states, the majority of them indeed, cannot be powerful, least of all because the already powerful nations colonized, divided, and weakened them, and are still doing so in many ways. Weakness of states has always been a function of a state world order that reproduces itself and resists change. So the state system ordains that states should be powerful and sovereign, but this very system keeps many states very weak. This is frustrating to the weak, and they may live their weakness as shame and develop inferiority complexes. Their subjects, especially those who have great old heritages, are likely to ensconce within themselves a grudge toward the powerful and think of revenge. This emanates from a structure that identifies might with right.

Power means war, expansion, conquest. The state that cannot wage war is not a sovereign one, which means (in the psychoanalytic terms) that it is castrated. By the way, Middle Eastern experts need to reflect on the fact that sub-state and anti-state Islamist armed movements appeared in a context marked with the impossibility for states like Syria and Egypt to practice war. The defeats of 1967 and 1973 had a castrating effect, and an Islamic phallus came to replace the limp Arab Nationalist one.

One can never exaggerate the role of the US in those two consecutive castrations. When nation states cannot own war, which is an essential function of states, the religious

Umma may try its luck. Better for many people in the United States to know a bit more about history and to reflect on their nation's role than to pay themselves compliments. Maybe it is even workable to think of 9/11 and the destruction of the Twin Towers as a revenge for something that happened decades before. Just try it, it will not hurt you. I may even add that Islamism is our collective unconscious that will surface up when our conscious embodied in states and Arab nationalist ideology is destroyed.

Heintz: Has the lack of economic opportunities helped fuel Salafism in rural Syria, while the lack of political rights and the ruthless nature of the Syrian upper class have helped the Muslim Brotherhood gain adherents in urban Syria?

Al-Haj Saleh: My analysis is that Salafism is rural Islamism in the time of neoliberal economic policies. Syrian rural areas were for the most part of the Baathist period of Syrian history closer to the regime. Since the beginning of this century the rural areas in Syria, especially those of the Sunni majority, deteriorated, and this created more suitable conditions for Salafi mobilization. Two big changes happened in Syria in the decade that preceded the revolution: the build-up of a neo-sultanic rule for the Assad dynasty, and a liberalization of the economy; both changes weakened the ordinary people and nurtured sectarianism.

I singled the Sunni rural areas out because "sects" were

formed in the Assad years as clientelist (wasta) networks that mediate between the ordinary people and the centers of power. The Sunni networks are loose and ineffective and many people lacked wasta (vitamin W, according to a popular expression in Syria), while the bureaucracy is fully corrupt and the legal system is equally corrupt and inept.

I want to add that politics in the Assadist era has always been a derivative of war. This condition is detrimental for modern secular organizations like ours, a bit harmful to “political Islam” like the Muslim Brotherhood (actually, they are more “societal” than social and political), but it is the ideal environment for Salafi-Jihadis because they are warring groups in their very essence, hostile to both society and politics. What can be deduced from this is that the political organizations that benefit from normalized political conditions in our countries are the democratic and leftist organizations. Maybe the Muslim Brotherhood will win the first round of election after the transition, but the ones who will ascend and become more visible are those whose very identities and roles are linked to a more organized society and to a sustainable political life. I mean secular social parties and organizations that can deal with the urgent social questions related to poverty, education, health, housing, and many other issues. This is to say that the American and European refusal to accept the Palestinian elections that led to Hamas’ victory in 2006 was really criminal. It was a big gift to the nihilist jihadi tendencies in the Arab World. These people were vocal in preferring the bullet box to the ballot box. Many of the organizations said so again after the Egyptian coup d’état in 2013.

Heintz: Can you talk about the treatment Syrian refugees have received in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States? How has their treatment been similar and how has it differed?

Al-Haj Saleh: It is a continuation of the treatment they got from the Assadi state and not a rupture from it. States all over the world have become more statist, and it seems that there are deep feelings of kinship among them. I mean the differences between “democratic” states and despotic ones are decreasing while the gap between the most democratic of them and the general population is widening. So, generally speaking, the refugees from Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan received “statist” reception; I mean they were reluctantly accepted, and they were expected to conform 100 percent to the rules of the receptive countries. Most importantly they were denied any political agency. The states have “programs” to accept this number of refugees or that, and you have to find a pigeon hole for yourself in their programs. This may well require that you lie to the officials of embassies and consulates, or the ones at refugee “concentration camps” in many European countries, in order that you get acceptance. If you thought that you are a man of a cause and you only need a travel document to facilitate your trips and talking on behalf of your cause, and that you do not want Germany, for instance, to pay you money at the expense of its taxpayers, you better forget it. You have to reiterate a story to convince an ignorant official that you are a “human case.” If the program accepted you, and it happened that you are an

intellectual, you will get a luxurious jail with a salary, maybe a generous grant from an institution known for hosting intellectuals and organizing cultural activities; and you will be displayed to the consumers of culture in the hosting country. You are in another program now, and you are planned for, you cannot plan for yourself.

As a passport-less Syrian I have enough experience in these issues. By the way, many Western officials were struck by the fact that I have never had a passport. For them, having a passport is a natural thing. Well, it is not. They just do not know how political nature is!

Usually people of minority origins can make it to Europe and the West more easily than those of Arab Muslims. The role of the secular West in promoting sectarianism in the Middle East has been always high, but it is even higher in the last few years. But the worst situation of Syrian refugees is monitored in Lebanon and Jordan. In general the legal and political status of the expatriate is a function of the legal and political status of the "patriates," the local population. In Jordan and Lebanon the vulnerable locals are not highly respected. In Turkey we are not granted the status of refugees, and that is one big reason why many Syrians risked the boat trips to Greece before making it to Europe. Now that they were eradicated from their homeland they want to be secure. As for the US, I think they have their own "programs." It seems that their plans are hidden from the public and I do not know the number of Syrians accepted in the richest and the most powerful country in

the world. I heard stories of Syrians singled out at the American airports for special interrogation. Any people who happened to visit Syria after March 15, 2011, are to be dealt with in a special way. They may be university professors from Britain, and they are still denied visas to visit the US, apparently because they caught some infection from Syria.

Heintz: Do you think the majority of the people in the Middle East are open to criticism of Islam? Do you see any similarities between what you called the Arab Islamist paternal culture that holds high regard for obedience to Islam to criticism people in the United States receive when they challenge the tenets of American exceptionalism?

Al-Haj Saleh: Islam was, and is still, questioned, problematized, and criticized by many people in Syria and the region. Most of them are Muslims, myself included. Sadek Jalal al-Azm, the respected Syrian thinker, wrote a book in 1968 with the title *A Critique of Religious Thought*. There was a court case against the then-young author. It ended with almost nothing. In 1994, there was an attempt on the life of Naguib Mahfouz, the great Egyptian novelist. He survived it, but [the Egyptian writer] Farag Foda was assassinated by Islamists in 1992.

So it is a changing situation, and it is a battle that we have not won. The present ascendance of Salafi-Jihadi Islamism is also a time of rising resistance to the religious powers and

of critique of religion. Under neo-sultanic regimes like that of the Assad dynasty, Mubarak's and Qaddafi's, religion came to play a resistant role and mosques were full of prayers, especially on Fridays. Presently in Raqqa, my native dilapidated city [formerly] occupied by Daesh, people resist[ed] by staying home at times of prayers. These resistances are on the course of producing their intellectual and ethical tools and their social and political organizations. The mainstream secular thought ignored issues of ethics and values, and never joined the popular struggle, thus putting itself outside the battle for political and religious liberties, and closer to the privileged local whites. This applies to women and men hailed in the right wing circles in the West as courageous and open minded. They are not. Their cause, in every single case that I know of, is themselves; self-promotion.

The pseudo-secularist battle with Islam is a Huntingtonian or civilizational one, not an emancipatory or a liberational one. Why should we criticize Islamists and Islamic thought? It is because we aspire to more justice, freedom, dignity, equality, that Islamists cannot offer us. That is why we resist Islamist oppression and discrimination. It's because they are discriminatory and oppressive, not because the perpetrators are Islamists. I raise these issues to say that participating in the popular struggles puts us in a better position to criticize religion and resist religious tyranny.

As for American exceptionalism, well, it is a myth, one that I think played a big role in preventing many Americans from

reflecting on themselves and the many injustices in their country and the injustices they have perpetrated on people in other countries. So its function is similar to the mazloomiyya/excellence narratives in our society.

However, we have our own copies of exceptionalism: an Islamic one that decides that Islam is superior to and different from other religions, that our religion is essentially linked to politics and secularization is thus impossible and unacceptable (many Huntingtonian secularists of ours would nod approvingly to this); and an Arab Nationalist copy that saw our countries permanently targeted by foreign conspiracies, and that we should stay united behind our genius leaders, the likes of Hafez Assad, to frustrate these conspiracies. Justified by this framework, Syrians lived under the oldest state of exception in the world, since 1963, from the very first moment of the Baathist coup d'état. This annulment of political life was nominally brought to an end in 2011, but was replaced with a law of fighting terrorism which is far worse. Exceptionalism is always an ideology that justifies undermining democracy and popular freedoms, never to defend more rights for the people.

Heintz: How important is inclusivity to a future democratic Syria? If the Assad regime is ousted and the Islamic State is severely weakened, what will the new regime have to do to prevent revenge killings? Would the majority of Syrians be OK with providing immunity for lower level criminals as long as Assad, high ranking officials in his regime, and members

of the Islamic State and other fundamentalist militias are tried and convicted for their crimes?

Al-Haj Saleh: I do not think that Syrians of various denominations are just thinking of how to clutch each other's neck. It is only due to the inherently humiliating character of Assadi violence, committed at the hands of the most sectarianized apparatuses in the country (the security agencies), that sectarian feelings became so rampant. Sects are revenge-demanding communities that live on humiliation. I suppose that the end of this sectarian regime will be the beginning of developing national plans against sectarianism, of which the most important element is to separate punishment from humiliation. The Assadist violence has never been punitive, proportionate, and abstract, it has always been revenge-generating, humiliating and full of hatred. Dignity was one main value of the Syrian revolution and it is in full opposition with humiliation. Of equal importance is the principle of accountability. In no way can those who engineered the killings escape absolutely deserved punishment. This is a vital precondition for preventing the growth of revenge tendencies. You cannot ask people not to seek revenge when you guarantee impunity for the criminals like Bashar Assad and his junta. The burden of revenge-avoidance should not be laid on the shoulders of the victims.

After more than five years of horrible crimes, among which many sectarian massacres occurred, hearts are full with hatred and deep distrust. And it is still going on. Never has

a project of an even relatively fair political arrangement been suggested to Syrians. What is being engineered by the Americans and Russians challenges any logic and any basic sense of justice. Bashar and his junta should be held accountable for what they did in order to effectively defeat Daesh and al-Qaeda, and to provide better conditions for creating a new Syrian majority, one that is inclusive of Arabs, Kurds, Muslims and Christians, Sunnis, Alawites, and others. True, a new Syrian majority can no longer be built against the Assadi state solely, but it is even more impossible for it to be built on fighting Daesh and al-Qaeda alone. This is a prescription for a new minority rule that defends itself only through killing people. One is led to say that the exclusion, rather than inclusion, is protected by the powerful of the world. I am afraid that what those apathetic leaders are arranging is at best sacrificing some low level criminals, while reinstalling the big criminals. The war on terror is the model. It is a method to punish low level thugs at the hands of high level ones.

Heintz: Should the United Nations Security Council be reformed or abolished because of the way Russia and China have used their vetoes to protect the Assad regime (or the way the U.S. has used its veto power to protect the Israeli government from being held accountable for human rights abuses against the Palestinians)?

Al-Haj Saleh: Those Russo-Chinese vetoes showed to what extent Syrians were Palestinianized, to what extent the Assad dynasty regime was Israelized, and to what degree Russia and China are imperialist powers. It is clear now after 65 months of the Syrian tragedy that the world order,

with its influential powers and international organizations, is absolutely devoid of any democratic potential. And it seems that the scandalous reinstallation of Bashar Assad over ruined Syria symbolizes the political and ethical bankruptcy of this oligarchic system. It is more than unreformable, it is amassing a criminality potential.

It seems that democracy is suffering everywhere. This is a global trend. The grand narrative of the war on terror is aggravating the situation and empowering only those who are already powerful, while disempowering those who are already powerless. Ordinary populations in the powerful countries themselves are candidates to join the powerless. The war on terror is anti-democratic everywhere in the world. We know this situation very well in Syria. And a Syrianized world will respond to demands of reform only in an Assadist way. This led to a revolution in Syria, and I do not see why things will be different in a progressively Syrianized world. For me, to be honest, this prospect that honors our immeasurable suffering and broken lives is the one that I find worthy of effort.