



25-06-2020

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Marina Naprushkina



Syrian writer and former prisoner of conscience Yassin al-Haj Saleh speaks to Belarusian activist Marina Naprushkina about the global rise of authoritarians, the “plague” of Putinism, and why the time is ripe for new political movements.

The below is an interview with the Syrian writer and Al-Jumhuriya co-founder [Yassin al-Haj Saleh](#), conducted by [Marina Naprushkina](#), a Belarusian artist and democracy activist. The interview took place in Berlin in April 2020.

Marina Naprushkina: Yassin, I would like to ask you so much about the Syrian revolution; the war and the siege; your sixteen years in prison; the time after that in Turkey and now in Berlin; and about love. In the [letters](#) you wrote to your wife Samira al-Khalil (who was abducted in Syria's Douma in 2013, and has not been seen since), you say, "Your husband is still the same writer who has no 'weapon' other than his words." What do you think, what do we have to aim our "weapons" against today?

Yassin al-Haj Saleh: The connection between words and the Syrian revolution is quite basic. The revolution was about appropriating politics; that is, owning talk about public issues and gathering and protesting publicly. Building on this, I think it is quite fair to say our struggle was essentially about words: using them, interpreting them, and protesting with them. Both the revolution and the words have been crushed during nine Trojan years, during which Syria has been reduced to a battlefield of inhuman powers, while Syrians are pushed back to silence and absence; dispersed, impoverished, "subalternized," and denied a say in their fate.

So I believe our words should be aimed against those who produce absence, or whose production of their presence is based on producing and consolidating our absence. That means first of all the genocidal dynastic regime, whose highest aim is to stay in power forever, and which surrendered the country to foreign powers in order to gain

their protection. Then the hierarchical and racist international regime, based on the sovereign states, which can easily turn genocidal, especially in this “War on Terror” era. Third, in the Syrian context, the nihilist Islamism that caused a lot of harm in Muslim countries and I think is already in decline. The three monopolize for themselves the right to talk and have a legitimate presence. Our struggle against them is about representing ourselves—speaking for ourselves as people who have the “right to have rights,” as Hannah Arendt put it—and about a recognized presence. In this context, the absence of Samira is for me a cause; a motivation and symbol of a national and global condition.

MN: In your [essay](#) critiquing the concept of solidarity, you say solidarity is like a commodity, and that a “solidarity market” exists today. In one of the discussions, you said that, in the end, we are not ready to fight for our convictions like you. You were detained for sixteen years at the time for being a member of [a splinter group of] the Communist Party. The artist Milica Tomić asks this question in one of her works: “Is there anything you are ready to give your life for?” Do we live in a time of opportunists? What explains this development?

YHS: Well, I did not mean to blame people for not fighting for their convictions “like me.” For one, it happened that I just cannot help it. I would have preferred a less cruel and desperate fight.

It is just that I thought solidarity was becoming a passive alternative to a more active engagement in the struggle for a better world. It gives relief to many consciences in the West to select one struggle and patronize its agents. Far from being an activity to change ourselves and the world,

solidarity in this way is compatible with changing nothing. Rather, when people are in solidarity with this cause or another that they pick out from the solidarity market, they tend to develop a sort of self-congratulatory consciousness that annuls the urge to change yourself and fight against self-satisfaction.

The defeat of communism in the 1980s has had the effect of normalizing the neoliberal capitalist order, even among those who are against it, who seem to have accepted Margaret Thatcher's famous claim that, "There is no alternative." We have been in this era for more than three decades, and this is a long time. NGO-ized solidarity belongs to this order. Now, after Syria, and in the midst of the Coronavirus crisis today, I think the need for other forms of co-engagement and co-struggle is extreme. We are at crossroads that will lead either to renewed forms of fascism and racism in the name of organic bonds and tradition, as Putin's ideologue Aleksander Dugin calls for, or more militant and emancipatory forms of struggle for equality, human dignity, and life on the planet. I wish to see many people unlearn patronizing, self-congratulatory, and selective practices of solidarity and instead connect struggles for equality and freedom together.

MN: After the Second World War, the populations of the countries concerned worked to rebuild their homes, schools, and cities. I think that helped this generation survive the cruel things they went through in the war. That is not the case in Syria. In the country itself, the war and dictatorship are not over. The people who left Syria live in different countries, and few are able to even take part in social life in exile. What experiences do you and your compatriots have here in Berlin? How can Berlin become a

new home?

YHS: Allow me first to say why this is not the case in Syria. Unlike Rwanda in 1994, and Cambodia in the second half of the 1970s, and even Nazi Germany, the genocidal regime in Syria is reinstalled in power. Not even a bare minimum of justice has been achieved: no political transition; no recognition of the suffering of the Syrian people; nothing. This is a promise of an even greater genocide ahead. Why so? In essence, ours is a struggle against racism, though without races. But then races everywhere are constructed by racism and discrimination, according to Frantz Fanon. It just happens that our “races” are called sects, and the Islamophobic world order today forms a strategic depth for this specific kind of racism. It is good for this order that there is an agency, called “the sovereign state,” that is busying itself killing Syrian blacks. That is why you do not hear protests against Russian savageries in Syria. It is just a new round of the old mission civilisatrice.

With friends and colleagues, we continue producing ideas and analysis for a better understanding of our struggle, our exiles, and the world. We defend our agency, whether political, ethical, or epistemological, as individuals and as people. We resist being reduced to humanitarian cases or passive victims. It is quite hard to keep fighting, as you can imagine, and it happens that we feel extremely exhausted at times, but we are aware how crucial the sustainability of our struggle is. So, I guess many of us are trying to mix it up: to have as normal a life as possible, and to keep on representing the forsaken country. Besides, we’re aware of the necessity to link our cause to other causes in the world, and to the world cause: healthy, humanity, and planet. I think we are moving forward a bit on this level.

MN: Today, we have much better opportunities to exchange information worldwide, to take pictures to document war and crime, to communicate and network. But what then frustrates solidarity, the solidarity that also becomes an action?

YHS: If my analysis about solidarity is correct, then its inability to translate into action is an integral part of it. It is designed to give you good feelings, not to do well.

Besides, there is not much solidarity in our world today. In the West (and solidarity, with its market and patronizing characteristics, is a commodity mostly produced in the West), solidarity is allotted only to those who share our values, who are not different from us, who are actually like us. So it is a narcissistic thing, a sort of "I love me" relationship. What I want to say is that in addition to its being a power relationship, lacking equality and reciprocity, solidarity as practiced today is also narcissistic and exclusivist.

I am fully aware that there are many wonderful people who are completely out of this I-love-me mold, and they think of their solidarity activism as a component of a broader struggle to challenge and change a world fraught with racism, discrimination, and victimization. Perhaps now is the right time for new movements and communities based on equality, respect, diversity, and courage.

MN: I come from Belarus, where our first president has been in power since 1994. The dictatorships today are more stable than ever. How can this be explained?

YHS: 26 years? Is yours preparing his son to inherit power from him, the way ours did? We have been under the Assad

family's rule for a whole 50 years. Because of the three yokes—the geopolitical (Israel, security, and superiority); the geo-economic (oil and Gulf consumer markets); and the geo-cultural (Islam, and so on); a triple yoke called the Middle East—tens of thousands were killed in Syria, with similar numbers jailed and tortured, when I was young, and now hundreds of thousands have been killed, with millions displaced, when I'm in my sixth decade. Our first torture war was during the last decade of the Cold War era, while the other came in the War on Terror era, which is just another global torture war like many colonial wars of the past (and present: Palestine). Russia is the main protector of our genocidal regime today. I guess your country, Belarus, is a Russian protectorate as well, and your Lukashenko is broadening his margins of freedom towards his people by being elected by Putin, the ultra-nationalist leader who is now preparing to change the constitution to stay in power for sixteen more years. This is life imprisonment for Russia, and very likely for the far smaller Belarus too.

Putinist Russia is our plague. While they are dominating our country, they do not care about the people, nor most probably about the worthless Assad himself; it is about their greatness and their imperialist hubris. Putin himself boasted of testing more than 200 weapons in Syria. He congratulated himself that Russia has \$15 billion worth of arms sales, and that there are plans for \$55 billion more.

MN: Your wife, and you, make it clear that a world war is being waged in Syria, but one directed against a people. Can you elaborate on that?

YHS: Samira said this just after the chemical massacre of

August 2013, and the chemical deal the following month between the US and Russia, which was even more criminal than the massacre itself. The meaning of the massacre followed by the deal was that you can kill your people with chemical weapons, and then you will be even more engaged in international politics than before, while your victims are even more excluded from politics, for which by that point they had paid 100,000 lives. Syrians became even more “worldless” after Samira was disappeared. I may just repeat that the “War on Terror,” which was the justification behind that sordid deal, and helped blind many in the world to the victimization of Syrians, is by no means a war. It is torture, and it has been weakening democracy everywhere in the world for decades. It is tragic that many find nothing except the War on Terror paradigm to formulate the struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic.

MN: What one can learn from the Syrian revolution? And why don't we talk about it today?

YHS: I think Syria was victimized at the altar of an institutionalized, long-term apathy and indifference, at the global level, towards whatever happens in the Middle East; and entrenched racism in the forms of Islamophobia and blind support to a racist polity like Israel, consolidated by the rentier states in the Gulf ruled by extremely corrupt and patriarchal dynasties that the West has patronized for a century if not longer. All that converged to make the Syrian struggle against a genocidal, racist regime invisible and meaningless. The Middle East is the name of a [space of exception](#) where colonialism has never ended. The US is an integral part of the Middle East system, though it is outside the region geographically. Europe is part of the system as well, and now Russia is entrenching itself therein.

We must learn this well, and unlearn the culturalist stuff that reduce politics to culture, and culture to religion, which is still dominant in the West (and the world) when it comes to the region. The “secular” West should secularize its understanding of the region in order to understand it. That includes the rise of nihilist Islamism between the 1980s and the Arab Spring.

Syria is a worldless microcosm, and I think we are now seeing a Syrianized world failing itself the way Syrians were failed, left to be massacred, dehumanized, and rendered superfluous, to use Arendt’s terminology.

Syria is no longer talked about because the world of governments and media was very successful in inhibiting even an approximate understanding of the biggest struggle this century. They see it as “complicated over there,” and turn their backs to what is happening. True, it is complicated in Syria, but it is analyzable in a way that shows the “complicators” in action. Chief among them are Russia, America, and its satellites, Israel for decades. I may add that it is becoming even more significant to better understand Syrian now precisely because the world has been progressively Syrianized. It is only wise for humans to know themselves.

MN: The Russian writer Varlam Shalamov, who spent over fifteen years in the arctic Kolyma region, is considered the definitive chronicler of the Gulag camps. He said the camp experiences do not teach anything. Today, thousands of people are in Assad’s prisons in Syria. Is there hope that these people will eventually return to their families? And, a personal question, which you don’t have to answer: what is it like to spend a day, a month, ten years in prison? What

helped you get through this time?

YHS: As a “graduate” of jail, I tend to disagree with Shalamov. Transforming our experiences, however cruel, into ideas and meanings is what helps us free ourselves from them and let them slip into the past. I became aware of the work of Viktor Frankel only very recently, but my work has been focusing on meaning in ways not very dissimilar to the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, starting from the etymological link between meaning and suffering in Arabic. Representing our experiences and producing meanings from them enables us to communicate to others, and to build a community of suffering-meaning with them. So, history and society are made from these experiences.

I do not ascribe inevitable creative or positive values to these experiences that were destructive to many. I just mean that we can reduce destruction by representing our experiences and producing ideas and imageries from them. In themselves they are meaningless, and they are meant to make us meaningless. We resist by incorporating them in our lives and finding emancipation in overcoming cruelty and destruction.

Still, even this emancipation is by no means a fair compensation. There is no possible compensation. There are no spare parts for our twenties and thirties when they are devoured by the monster of jail. And most of those years were devoured in my personal case. But we must tame the monster as much as we can to be able to survive it. Some of us were able to do this. And I think this is a genuine act of resistance.

At times, especially after Samira's silent absence, I keep wondering if I have not been transformed into a monster myself. Does one really survive monstrosities?

Marina Naprushkina is a Belarusian artist and democracy activist based in Berlin. She is the founder of the [Office for Anti-Propaganda](#).