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Towards an inhabitable world

Al-Jumhuriya's address at the Theodor Heuss award ceremony

Al-Jumhuriya Collective



In a two-day ceremony held in the New Palace's "White Hall" in Stuttgart, Southwest Germany, Al-Jumhuriya received the 57th Theodor Heuss Medal for Special Democratic Commitment.

Since 1964, the Theodor Heuss Foundation has celebrated the memory of the first German Federal President, Theodor Heuss, honoring individuals and institutions committed to defending democracy, freedom and human rights in Europe and the world.

For the year 2022, the Foundation honored the Russian

Memorial Foundation, which has worked for decades to preserve the collective memory of the victims of Stalinism. In addition to Al-Jumhuriya Collective, the medals of this year went to Olga Romanova, a Russian journalist and human rights activist; NSU Watch, a German observatory supporting victims of right-wing violence; and Słubice-Frankfurt, the Polish-German Pride Parade. Below is our address at the colloquium preceding the award ceremony, delivered by our colleague Nisrine Al Zahre. In addition to Nisrine, Al-Jumhuriya was also represented by Karam Nachar and Yassin Swehat.

Dear colleagues and friends,

Thank you all for coming today. I would also like to thank the esteemed Theodor Heuss Foundation for granting us their prestigious prize.

We are living in unprecedented times, not only because of the massive violence we witness, or the systemic and horrific documentation of this violence – which we continue to describe as incredible – but because of the generalized impunity, complete indifference, and normalization of destruction.

War criminals and perpetrators of crimes against humanity continue to appear on television, and fascist politicians whose rhetoric is steeped with hate are invited to all platforms. This normalization is extremely destructive, because it nullifies the idea of “the world” as a site of possible futures, and an ecosystem in which to exchange and learn from shared memories, thrive or at least avoid the worst.

It is truly terrifying for us Syrians to see Ukrainians load

their lives in plastic bags and leave their country; to witness how they set up blue tents in makeshift camps. This sense of déjà vu is unbearably grotesque, because it heralds the creation of a “non-world” where soul-defeating anomie prevails.

This recurring horror is sickening – the French adjective *immonde* is very apt here. The realm of possibility is jeopardized, and everything becomes impossible. Sometimes we wake up in panic, hold a map of the world to find a place where our children can once again take refuge, but we find none. All places are equally threatening.

We Syrians know a thing or two about the dire effects of this pathological recurrence. After all, our contemporary history is governed by one recurring element: the massacre. One such massacre took place in the Tadamon neighborhood in southern Damascus, a video of which we saw a few days ago. This recurrence, one massacre after another, drives us into madness, into nihilism and meaninglessness. We do not want a Syrianized world – to borrow from Syrian writer Yassin Al-Haj Saleh – because a Syrianized world will be uninhabitable.

Our gathering today is foundational, because it reanimates a possible “world,” a world of free exchange where all parties can contribute.

We at Al-Jumhuriya strive to resist the meaninglessness resulting from such recurrence of violence – not only as Syrians, but also as a group and an organization. We even wrote a manifesto in defense of a recurring sense of surprise, of the inherent innocence of the world inscribed in the notion of surprise. It was a manifesto against

cynicism. We have not been exhausted. A few days ago, we were the first Arabic-speaking platform to publish the full investigation of the Tadamon massacre, in which forty-one people were killed. Our anger and resentment in the face of terror means that terror must remain unexpected, episodic, and not the norm. But our anger and shock in the face of nihilism require tremendous effort and a willingness to overcome distortion, madness, and the denial of massacres. Distortion and denial triumph only when fatigue and when meaninglessness rear their heads.

You, colleagues, attendees and those in charge of the Foundation, represent “the world” to us – your voice resonates in recognition of our mission and work, and above all, in recognition of our surprise at the current state of the world. This beautiful ceremony and this award represent to us an answer: “Yes, we are listening to you. Yes, we live in the same world as you. And yes, we understand your surprise and indignation. We live in this very world and we too are worried about it.” Confession, as the German philosopher Axel Höneth put it, is the first pillar of democracy – the first pillar of “the world” if you will. You and we are building the foundations of a possible world.

Thank you again!