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Interview with Yassin al-Haj Saleh

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Sixteen years and fourteen days. That is how long Yassin al-Haj Saleh was imprisoned in the cells of Assad senior. The Syrian author is not however a broken man, even though his wife and brother disappeared three years ago, kidnapped by radical Islamists. Even when Aleppo is in ruins. 'In prison I became immune to despair.'

Our interview is already over when Yassin al-Haj Saleh, 55, has to go on stage. The Syrian writer has been invited to Brussels by the European Endowment for Democracy. While

bombs are mercilessly hitting Aleppo – the city where long ago he studied medicine – he has come to Brussels to ask for attention for the only party in this conflict that is constantly being neglected: the Syrian people. But first he wants to tell us one more thing.

‘In the past hour I noticed that you expect me to have an answer to all possible questions’, he says, already in the door. ‘That happens regularly: because I’m Syrian, people think I know everything about this conflict. But it’s getting harder and harder to explain what happens on the ground. In my country it’s not a civil war which is unfolding. It has become a complex international conflict in which tens of countries are participating.’ He raises his hands. ‘I also don’t have all the answers.’

Saleh is a privileged witness, however. On 30 March 2011, two weeks after the Syrian revolution started, he decided to go underground in Damascus. In the struggle against Bashar al-Assad the author wanted to leave no stone unturned, not mince his words. Saleh already had witnessed the Assads’ horrors first hand before. When he was 19 years old, in 1980, he was imprisoned by the regime of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar’s father. He was only released in 1996, when he was 35.

It wasn’t the end of his ordeal. In 2013 the situation in his own country became too dangerous for him, so he left for Istanbul, where he still lives. Soon after his departure, his wife Samira Khalil was kidnapped by a radical Islamist group in Syria. Saleh has not heard from her since. In the same year, a few months before Samira’s abduction, his brother Feras was plucked off the street by Islamic State terrorists. He, too, disappeared without a trace.

Saleh has remained active all this time. In Istanbul he co-founded Hamish (Arabic for the words margin and footnote), the Syrian Culture House in Istanbul. He also remains a prolific writer, publishing books, essays and opinion articles, mainly in Arabic publications. Hence he is often called the 'conscience' of the Syrian revolution. He is a charming man with melancholic eyes and a marvelous smile, even when every day it gets harder to show that smile. In the past weeks and months he looked on with abhorrence at what is going on in Aleppo.

'This touches me very deeply', he explains. Our interview is conducted in English, a language Saleh learned in solitude in his years in jail. 'I earned my diploma in Aleppo. I lived in that city for seven years. I know the neighborhoods which are now under bombardment, and the people who are dying there. It's terrible. But it's much more than a personal drama. In front of our eyes, in real time, one of the oldest cities in the world is being destroyed. Aleppo is one of the cradles of civilization. The deafening silence of the international community makes it even worse. They look away from this massive, unspeakable suffering. In doing that, humanity cuts itself in the flesh.'

De Standaard: In which way?

Yassin al-Haj Saleh: First one person was getting killed and it was ignored. Then ten people, a thousand, and it was still being ignored. By now there are half a million casualties in Syria. Still looking away is only possible for those who can switch off all their sensitivity to human suffering. To justify their stance, they use the most reprehensible of arguments: Syrians are backward, they're extremists, terrorists etc. People are being killed and slandered. This is effectually

double killing. The drama in Aleppo will haunt the world for decades.

DS: You know many people there. Do they still long for freedom? Or do they mainly hope that the war would finish now?

YHS: Do they have to chose? They long for the end of this war and they long for freedom.

DS: You don't think there are Syrians who would accept Assad again, as long as the bombs will stop falling?

YHS: No, a large majority of Syrians wants him out. Even the people who ostensibly are loyal to Assad, do not respect him. They, too, want political change. And that change is only possible if the Assad dynasty disappears. One needs to bear in mind that Syria had a very special form of dictatorship: the Assad clan didn't rule the country, they owned it. We, the citizens, were their slaves. Their strategy for Syria is clear: Assad, or no-one. If Assad can't cling to his power, then the whole country - which they have been plundering for decades already - should disappear from the map.

I think Syrians are mainly tired. They don't see any perspective for change anymore. This conflict is getting worse every year. The year 2016 was bloodier than 2015, which was worse than 2014 and so on. We keep descending deeper into hell. We have never received meaningful support or protection from those who are able to support and protect. The world has let Syrians down.

DS: Would the Syrians who demonstrated against Assad in 2011 have made the same choices, if they had known then

what they know today?

YHS: I believe so. Syrians were encouraged by the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain. They were convinced that the world would not stand by idly if the regime would strike hard. That had happened before, in the early 1980s: Hafez al-Assad killed thousands of Syrians in Hama, a horrible crime which for us is a fresh memory. We rose up again in 2011, and we thought that a second Hama was impossible. Well, we were mistaken. By now the death toll in Syria is Hama twentyfold and more.

DS: In Spring of 2011 you yourself were convinced that Bashar al-Assad would be removed by the end of the year.

YHS: In those days I compared the revolution to a pregnancy. I hoped it would last nine months or so. It takes much more time, and the struggle is far from over.

DS: The Syrian army now controls all of Aleppo, for the first time in four years. Is this an important turning point?

YHS: Maybe, but it's certainly not the end of the war. It is not the Syrian army which conquered Aleppo, by the way. That job was done by Russians, Iranians, Hezbollah. I even wonder how many of Assad's soldiers really partook in the battle.

Since the bomb attack on 18 July 2012, when top brass officers and intelligence chiefs of the Assad regime were assassinated in Damascus, everybody got involved. Isn't it absurd that out of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, four are fighting in Syria? Russia, the United States, France and the United Kingdom are all involved. Isn't it absurd that jihadists from tens of different

countries are active in Syria?

This has become a global conflict. We've already lost our sovereignty a long time ago. The Iranians and the Russians are now the true masters of Syria.

DS: Assad seems to be firmer in control than two or three years ago, even when he has to thank Russia and Iran for it. Do you see any chance that he would readjust his course in a more humane direction?

YHS: I'm quite convinced that Assad will act in an even more repressive way. When Assad senior had squashed the opposition in the early 1980s, a wave of fascism swept over the country. Tens of thousands of people were incarcerated, tortured, humiliated. This time it won't be different. When a revolution is suppressed, regimes always act with even more brutality than before. In Egypt, the situation is worse after general Sisi's coup than it was under Mubarak. In the prison cells there, women and even men are now being raped. That wasn't the case before.

DS: You have spent sixteen years in jail under Assad senior. How did those years change you?

YHS: They didn't just "change" me, that word is not drastic enough to describe those years. Those sixteen years were my second childhood. In that sense one might call them a privilege. Having two childhoods is a privilege, isn't it? Who can say he grew up twice? I have a double set of memories. I often think back to my time as a school boy in Raqqa, to my boyhood friends. Next to those memories I see images of my time in jail, and my colleagues there.

DS: Why were you arrested in the first place?

YHS: Because I was a member of a Communist Party opposing the regime. When I ended up in jail, of course I didn't have any idea that it would last so long.

You know, now I see that formative experience as an emancipatory process. Everybody has prisons within him, prejudices and limitations one can't surpass. I was given sixteen years to fight against those. One could say I earned my real diploma in jail. I learned more in the cell blocks of Hafez al-Assad than at the university of Aleppo.

DS: You were also incarcerated in the infamous Tadmor prison, which is known as...

YSH: (interrupts) It was the most horrible place on Earth.

DS: How long were you there?

YHS: Eleven months and sixteen days. A terrible time. Tadmor was not a prison, it was a concentration camp. Everyone there was tortured, starved, humiliated, and so was I. They didn't do it to punish us or collect information. Some prisoners there were already in jail for more than 15 years and still they were being tortured, and for years after that. It didn't make any sense. It was a way to discipline the whole society. It was a place where all Syrians were being humiliated. It was a factory where the essence of the Assad regime was being produced on an industrial scale: fear.

DS: You were in jail for sixteen years. Still, when the revolution began in 2011, you decided to participate and go underground. You could have decided at the time that you had already fulfilled your duty.

YHS: That would be shameful reasoning. One has never

fulfilled his duty. Keeping silent was not an option.

In the years before the revolution I also wrote articles. But of course I could never go full steam ahead. I never wrote untruths, but I couldn't call certain things by their proper names. In March 2011 I didn't want to do that anymore. I went underground to leave every form of self-censorship behind me. I felt we had reached a historical turning point.

Maybe there was another factor at play. During my years in prison I had become addicted, so to speak, to such experiences. At the beginning of the revolution I had the feeling that I had been handed a second chance for change. For me that is true freedom: to change yourself. If you remain the same person for eighty years, you're actually living behind bars. To be honest: I never thought that the struggle would be so long, so hard, and so costly.

DS: Was it a mistake?

YSH: No.

DS: You did pay a very high price.

YHS: Of course I never thought that my wife and brother would be kidnapped. That the price would be so high. On a personal level I went through a civil war. Since 2013 I haven't heard from or about Samira or Feras.

DS: Was that worth it?

YHS: No. Two "obligations" clashed with each other. I couldn't but engage myself in the struggle for political change in Syria. But it did lead to a total personal tragedy.

In prison they also used to put us in positions that would tear us apart. The regime offered several times to set me free, but in exchange I had to sign a document that would rob me of my dignity. They made a proposal when I was in my twenties... It was extremely difficult not to sign. At that young age you don't want to be in prison. But I didn't do it.

Now I don't even have the luxury to chose. My enemies rob me of the privilege to surrender. Which makes continuing the struggle inevitable. If not, I'd risk robbing Samira and Feras of their dignity. I can't give up. I'm their representative now.

DS: Your wife and brother were abducted by radical Islamists. Did you see that danger coming?

YHS: In May 2012 I wrote a long essay in which I warned for the rise of, what I called at the time, "militant nihilism". At first, the revolution in Syria was largely non-violent. But because the regime responded so violently and because international help didn't materialise, the model of the jihadists gained ground. The more dead bodies appeared in the streets - once in Douma in 2013 I saw 26 bodies in the same day - the more attractive an ever more militant Islamism became. Especially in a country like Syria, where the Sunni religious majority had already been repressed for years.

That's how we ended up in an escalation of fear and violence. Syrians got ever more angry, frustrated, desperate. The salafists provided an answer to a desire to destruct. Destruct the regime, and the whole world. And the self. Salafi jihadi organizations are self destruction manifestations in our contemporary societies. Suicide

bombers are the embodiment of this tendency.

DS: On the battlefield radical Islamists like Islamic State and Al-Qaeda now seem to be losing.

YHS: That's the only positive aspect we can see in all that's happening now. Maybe this will become the Islamists' Waterloo. But make no mistake: even if that would be the case, the situation will not improve. A country has been destroyed. Half a million people have been killed. Twelve million Syrians have been forcibly displaced. Even if one would want to erase all those facts, it's just not possible.

DS: Do you think that the 'War on Terror', now defined as the fight against Islamic State, has become too much of a priority for the West?

YHS: It's a post-democratic war. There's no clear beginning, no clearly defined enemy, no clear end game. It's a war that leads to a perpetual state of emergency. Western democracies are already suffering greatly from this. And it's very dangerous.

At the same time, the man who between March 2011 and August 2013 had over ten thousand people tortured to death, is allowed to proceed. Why is the war against IS so much more important than the fight against Bashar al-Assad? In fact, the message the West sends to the people of Syria is very clear: we think our lives are far more important than yours.

DS: Do you feel like the West sacrifices you?

YHS: No, worse, we have been sacrificed and dismissed as irrelevant. In August 2013, Assad committed mass murder

against his own population, with chemical weapons. Afterwards the United States and Russia concluded a cowardly deal. The perpetrator was allowed to go free in exchange for the destruction of his chemical weapons. Both sides saved face, but the very people who lost 1.466 lives just weeks before, were let down. It got worse: the regime got a laissez-passer to continue its massacre with other weapons. That's exactly what Assad did: he dropped massive amounts of barrel bombs and bunker busters. He even continued to use chemical weapons, because somehow he managed never to hand them over completely.

In my view, the reaction to that poison gas attack is the worst international crime of the past decades. It was a gigantic attack on the truth. Nobody can say they didn't know. It happened right before the eyes of the international community.

DS: Western critics often argue that the Syrian opposition didn't get the necessary support because Assad's opponents were hopelessly divided amongst themselves. Do you understand that argument?

YHS: No. Of course the opposition was divided. How else could it be, after decades of dictatorship? Did anyone truly expect that suddenly a united opposition with an open mind, a moderate discourse and a powerful plan of action would appear on stage? Such hypocrisy: are we going to blame the victims for being weak? You may also recall that before the revolution not one world leader had anything critical to say about Bashar occupying his fathers post. (Former US Secretary of State) Madeleine Albright even went to Damascus to shake his hand. And not one leftist or

communist party made any noise in all those years about the fate of the republic in Syria. Not one of them.

DS: Are you still a communist?

YHS: No, though I am still a leftist. Most of my former comrades on the global level mainly excel in their complete ignorance on Syria. Their world views are totally obsolete. What they presume to know, is based on memories. They mainly remember the old days when in the Middle East there was a supposedly socialist country called Syria. Which has always been nonsense in the first place. Since 1980, at the latest, that nonsense has turned into self-deception. It's highly remarkable that the old left, when discussing Syria, expresses almost the same views as the populist right.

DS: What about the new left?

YHS: The social democrats are less archaic, but they have completely zoomed in on the West and have lost their international beliefs somewhere along the road.

DS: You are a refugee now. What do you think of the way Europe is handling the refugee crisis?

YHS: For whom is this a crisis, actually? For the refugees or for Europe? (emphatically) The real problem is that people were forced to leave their country, their homes and their families, after they had already been abandoned for years. Of course these people want to go to countries like Germany or Sweden now. Why would Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan be more logical places to host them? These refugees are extremely rational: they know that their prospects will be less in the region and better in Europe.

DS: Do you still believe in a way out of the Syrian conundrum?

YHS: Not while Assad remains in place. A big international conference seems unavoidable, with the goal of finding a new political majority for Syria. If we have to continue with Assad, there will be tremendous resentment.

DS: Do you still hope to return to Syria one day?

YHS: My hope is not very large. But after all those years in prison, I have become immune to despair. I was in my twenties. I should have been in university, meeting girlfriends, partying. All that wasted time will never come back. I felt despair about that in those days. Now I'm forever liberated of those feelings of despair. I am still fighting.

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