



A DOUBLE CRISIS YASSIN AL-HAJ SALEH

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, born in Raqqa, Syria in 1961, is a Syrian writer and political dissident. While he was studying medicine in Aleppo he was arrested and spent sixteen years in prison in Syria. Al-Haj Saleh is married to Samira Khalil, a former political prisoner, who has been abducted and “disappeared” since December 2013. He writes for Arabic- and at times for English-speaking outlets. He is a founding member of the Al-Jumhuriya group and of Hamish (fringe), the Syrian cultural house in Istanbul. Prizes: Prince Claus Award in 2012, Omar Ortilan Prize in 2016, and Kurt-Tucholsky Prize in 2017. Publications: أساطير الآخرين: نقد الإسلام المعاصر ونقد نقده (Myths of the Successors: a Critique of Contemporary Islam and a Critique of the Critique). Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2012. السجون السورية بالخلاص يا شباب، 16 عاما في السجون (Salvation, oh Boys: 16 Years in the Syrian Prisons). English edition: *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*. London: Hurst, 2014. – Address: Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Wallotstraße 19, 14193 Berlin.

I tend to think of the nine months that I lived in Berlin against a broader personal and collective background, on the one hand, and against a cultural and historical one on the other. It was the longest period I have resided in Europe, of which I visited only a few countries before, beginning only in 2014. Living outside Syria for almost five years now, I was part of a huge exodus of Syrians to neighboring countries and further away. Almost six million Syrians are expatriates now, more than one quarter of the population, with one million of them reaching Europe. Maybe three quarters of the European Syrians are in Germany. This is a big thing and it is already affecting the world in different ways. I feel

there is something peculiar about this period: Europe is in a crisis (and so is the world at large, for that matter). Securitization of politics and the rise of right wing populism are two obvious dimensions of the crisis whose essence, in my opinion, is the lack of any global emancipatory project in this time of globalization. Normative dimensions of democracy related to justice, freedom, equality and human dignity are being eroded because we do not have a vision of a better and fairer world to fight for. Reduced to procedures, democracy cannot resist authoritarian right wing populism. The world is not moving forward, it is just moving around itself. A black hole may be waiting for us behind a turn.

Two aspects of the crisis are directly related to Syria: “the refugee crisis” and “terrorism”. A third aspect, deeply connected to the essence of the European crisis, is the tolerance by many in Europe (politicians from the whole spectrum: left, mainstream, and right, experts, journalists, even some intellectuals) of an extermination state in Syria that has continued for more than seven years, during which up to one million may have been killed, hundreds of thousands brutally tortured and humiliated, and 13 million displaced internally and outside the country, which has been under the genocidal rule of the Assad dynasty for almost half a century. This tolerance is closely related in my view to one face of what I call the Islamic Question: Islamophobia. The other face of this global problem being Islamism, a complex politico-religious phenomenon that emerged between the two world wars, less than a century ago. This has hurt us in Syria and the Middle East a great deal, but it is already hurting Europe itself. Still, one hardly discerns any genuine intellectual efforts to oppose this deeply seated irrational and unethical tendency in Europe and the West, I mean the previous war of conquest and for supremacy that has not been seriously challenged in minds and souls.

European intellectuals have been our teachers in the Arab world for generations. This is changing currently. They are becoming more and more parochial when it is vital to think and to feel globally. It is left to us, far less equipped for the task, to work for globalizing thought and feeling. An intellectual uprising is overdue in Europe. And the world. An uprising against pervading fatigue and surrender to parochialism.

My project at the Wiko was about modes of mass murder. In the course of nine rich months (for I had to stop my Fellowship five weeks before my colleagues), the project was modified to something about Syria and extermination. With the world’s influential powers intervening in Syria and the Syrians scattered in the world, Syria is a global metaphor. A lot about politics, state, religion, man and the international system can be learnt from this laboratory. The book that I wish to write may take two years, starting now, but I

already have a rather detailed plan for it and have developed some tools: cold genocide, genocide as a global condition and the distinction between two forms of exception: exception from punishment like the one enjoyed by Israel and the Assad dynasty state, and exception from protection as exemplified by Palestinians and Syrians. The roots of the (in-)famous Arab or Islamic exception from democracy lie in the soil of the space of exception, that is the Middle East, the modern peoples' prison. A fourth tool is a concept of dynamic exception, excepting exception so to speak, which is the case of a new ferocious class in Syria organically related to the regime and that of an equally ferocious agents: the genocidal Islamists.

Apart from the fact that exception and exceptionality seem to be a fertile entry to global politics today, they have deep personal implications for me. It happened that unwelcome exceptions hit me hard. They were formative experiences, life changers indeed. However, I have benefited from good exceptions as well, the last of which being that I will be at the Wiko again for some months after my premature leave.

In Europe and at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, this is symbolically charged for me. For generations in our culture, to be an intellectual has meant to be European in a way, when Europe means learning, knowledge, debate, philosophy and the future of the world. Now that the road to the future is blocked and Syria, which is already a German and European cause, is a paradigm for this blockage, high culture can justify itself only by thinking of this global conjecture and finding ways out. These thoughts were in my mind while at the Wiko, which offered me a great chance for meeting many interesting people from many countries and diverse backgrounds around the world, talking to them, learning from them and reading good books. This global space can be thought of as a front in the fight for a future and against the enemies: fatigue and parochialism.